

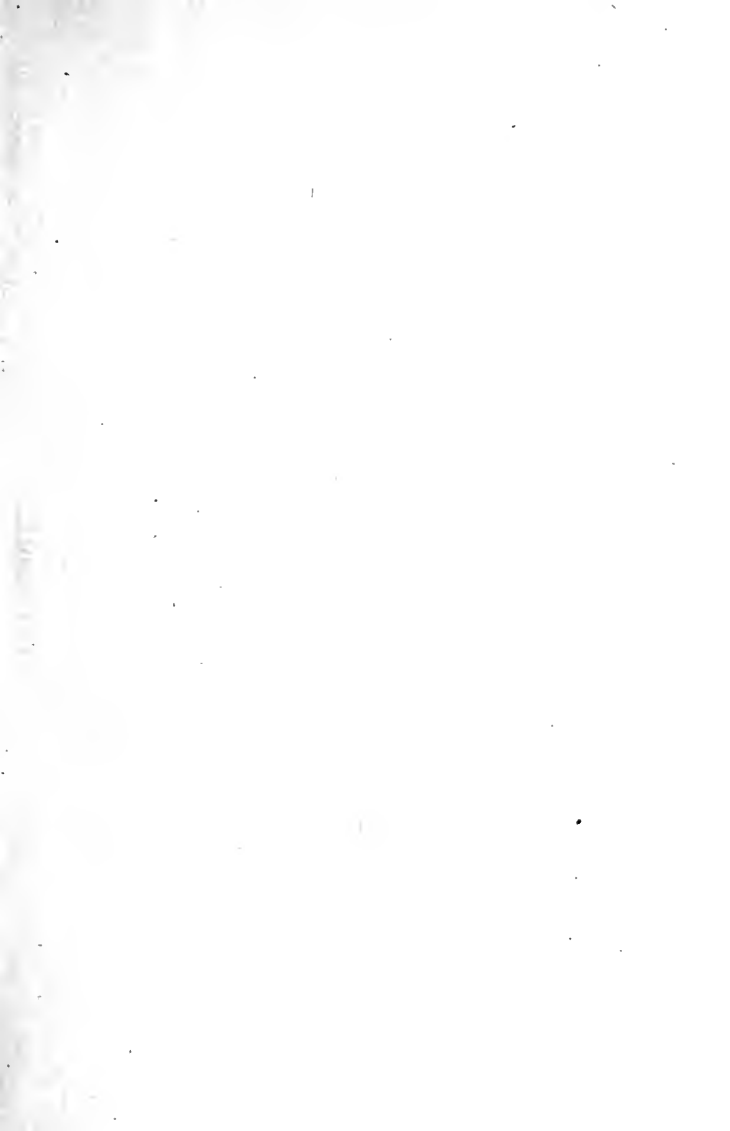


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VOL. 874.

ARCHIE LOVELL BY MRS. EDWARDES.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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CONTENTS

OF VOLUME II.

	Page
CHAPTER I. Archie's Confession	7
— II. A Vampire "At Home"	29
— III. Le Renard prêche aux Poules	42
— IV. Found Drowned	51
— V. Dead Rose-Leaves!	61
— VI. By the River-Side	69
— VII. "G. S.D."	81
— VIII. Working up a Case	92
— IX. Durant's Court	111
— X. Archie pays her Debt	130
— XI. In the second Column of "the Times"	153
— XII. The Lull before the Storm	168
— XIII. Farewell to Lucia	181
— XIV. "Fais ce que dois!"	203
— XV. Awakening Conscience	215
— XVI. "Where is she?"	229
— XVII. "Here!"	262

	Page
CHAPTER XVIII. Archie's Ovation	269
— XIX. In the Dark Hour	280
— XX. "Adviene que pourra!"	291
— XXI. A Glimpse of the Blue	301

THE END

THE END

CHAPTER XXII. The Great Day	311
CHAPTER XXIII. The Great Day	321
CHAPTER XXIV. The Great Day	331
CHAPTER XXV. The Great Day	341
CHAPTER XXVI. The Great Day	351
CHAPTER XXVII. The Great Day	361
CHAPTER XXVIII. The Great Day	371
CHAPTER XXIX. The Great Day	381
CHAPTER XXX. The Great Day	391
CHAPTER XXXI. The Great Day	401
CHAPTER XXXII. The Great Day	411
CHAPTER XXXIII. The Great Day	421
CHAPTER XXXIV. The Great Day	431
CHAPTER XXXV. The Great Day	441
CHAPTER XXXVI. The Great Day	451
CHAPTER XXXVII. The Great Day	461
CHAPTER XXXVIII. The Great Day	471
CHAPTER XXXIX. The Great Day	481
CHAPTER XL. The Great Day	491
CHAPTER XLI. The Great Day	501
CHAPTER XLII. The Great Day	511
CHAPTER XLIII. The Great Day	521
CHAPTER XLIV. The Great Day	531
CHAPTER XLV. The Great Day	541
CHAPTER XLVI. The Great Day	551
CHAPTER XLVII. The Great Day	561
CHAPTER XLVIII. The Great Day	571
CHAPTER XLIX. The Great Day	581
CHAPTER L. The Great Day	591
CHAPTER LI. The Great Day	601
CHAPTER LII. The Great Day	611
CHAPTER LIII. The Great Day	621
CHAPTER LIV. The Great Day	631
CHAPTER LV. The Great Day	641
CHAPTER LVI. The Great Day	651
CHAPTER LVII. The Great Day	661
CHAPTER LVIII. The Great Day	671
CHAPTER LIX. The Great Day	681
CHAPTER LX. The Great Day	691
CHAPTER LXI. The Great Day	701
CHAPTER LXII. The Great Day	711
CHAPTER LXIII. The Great Day	721
CHAPTER LXIV. The Great Day	731
CHAPTER LXV. The Great Day	741
CHAPTER LXVI. The Great Day	751
CHAPTER LXVII. The Great Day	761
CHAPTER LXVIII. The Great Day	771
CHAPTER LXIX. The Great Day	781
CHAPTER LXX. The Great Day	791
CHAPTER LXXI. The Great Day	801
CHAPTER LXXII. The Great Day	811
CHAPTER LXXIII. The Great Day	821
CHAPTER LXXIV. The Great Day	831
CHAPTER LXXV. The Great Day	841
CHAPTER LXXVI. The Great Day	851
CHAPTER LXXVII. The Great Day	861
CHAPTER LXXVIII. The Great Day	871
CHAPTER LXXIX. The Great Day	881
CHAPTER LXXX. The Great Day	891
CHAPTER LXXXI. The Great Day	901
CHAPTER LXXXII. The Great Day	911
CHAPTER LXXXIII. The Great Day	921
CHAPTER LXXXIV. The Great Day	931
CHAPTER LXXXV. The Great Day	941
CHAPTER LXXXVI. The Great Day	951
CHAPTER LXXXVII. The Great Day	961
CHAPTER LXXXVIII. The Great Day	971
CHAPTER LXXXIX. The Great Day	981
CHAPTER LXXXX. The Great Day	991
CHAPTER LXXXXI. The Great Day	1001

ARCHIE LOVELL.

CHAPTER I.

Archie's Confession.

IN all the great and solemn crises of her earthly pilgrimage—creditors pressing them more sorely than their wont; old Lord Lovell returning inhuman answers to appeals for money; poor Frederick's pictures making their periodical journeys home, unsold, from London—the instant devastation, or, as she termed it herself, "setting to rights" of the entire clothing of the household, had been, for years past, an unfailing source of comfort to Bettina's troubled spirit.

This devastation, a kind of sacrifice laid upon the altar of the *Dii penates*—and having its origin, doubtless, in that mysterious instinct which has made man from the earliest ages believe in some occult power of propitiatory offerings to avert impending grief—had, indeed, by force of habit become incorporated at length as a vital, or integral, part of Bettina's religion. And so to-day, although the news of coming into four hundred a year, besides the glebe, was an occasion rather for thanksgiving than humiliation, her heart, staunch to its traditions, had flown (after due preliminary torture of the acolyte, Jeanneton) to the formal celebration of the rites or services of her creed for relief.

Now the first feature in these rites was to take out everybody's clothes from their different drawers and cupboards, and to pile them in heaps on beds, chairs, and all other available pieces of furniture round the rooms: the second, to sort them over, or subdivide them indefinitely over the floors until there was no place left on which to plant the sole of the foot: the third, to sit down and cry over every one's extravagance, Archie's growth, and the ravages of moth: and the last, to make long lists, never looked at again by human eye, of every article of clothing the family possessed, and then return them, meekly, and with no discernible result whatever of her labours, to their place. The moment that Archie and her father left the house with Major Seton, Bettina prepared herself for action; and rushing away to Mr. Lovell's room, threw herself, with true fanatical ardour, upon the first initiatory task of turning every piece of furniture it possessed inside out. This done, she had devoted half an hour or so to the dismemberment of her own bureaux; then returned, meted out and subdivided her husband's wardrobe until tall pyramids of cloth (looking each of them not very unlike Mr. Lovell himself) were dotted at random all over his floor; and finally, faithful to her principle of making every part of the habitation untenable at the same moment, had betaken herself, after a discursive but thorough routing of two presses of house linen on her road, to Archie's room.

The usual shortcomings with regard to hooks and buttons; the usual chaos of gloves that wouldn't match; unmended stockings; boots spoilt with salt water, and frocks grown too short in the skirt; "and every one of her white dresses in the wash at once," thought Bet-

tina, shaking her head despondently, as with paper and pencil in her hand she sought in vain for any coherent article wherewith to head her list. "I'd better begin with the ball-dress after all. That at least must be in a condition to describe." And with honourable pride she unpinned the white linen wrapper in which she had encased all the paraphernalia of Archie's one night of dissipation, and prepared herself to take a leisurely inventory of its contents.

"Upper skirt of white grenadine: item, puffed underskirt of ditto: item, white silk body and trimmings: item, clear Swiss muslin skirt." The upper skirt, the puffed skirt, the white silk body and trimmings, all there to cry "adsum." But where was the clear Swiss muslin skirt?

With the tightening of the heart that is said to prelude the oncoming of any dread discovery, Bettina made a convulsive dash at a tower of half-clean skirts resting on poor Archie's little bed, and found it. It! The skirt for which she had paid two francs fifty centimes the mètre, which her own hands had folded and left fair and unsullied with the rest, now a blackened tumbled rag! (I record what Bettina thought) trodden out in the hem; torn away from the gathers; and with a good half-yard of mingled dust and mud as a trimming round the bottom of the skirt.

Mrs. Lovell staggered back against the wash-stand—the only thing untenanted by clothes in the room—and one solitary word rose to her lips—Jeanneton! As a clever detective by a single, seemingly unimportant fact—the impress of a foot, the wadding out of a pistol—first gets hold of a clue that shall enable him to follow the tortuous windings of crime, and

ultimately discover its guilty author, so did Bettina, on the spot, evolve a whole labyrinth of mystery and of crime from the condition of those nine yards of torn and blackened muslin. And the key-note to that crime, the solution to that mystery was—Jeanneton.

Mrs. Lovell had long held opinions from which no argument could move her, as to the fatal results of allowing foreign servant-girls their liberty with regard to processions, fêtes, balls, and the like diversions. "We know what such things would lead to in England," she used to say, when Mr. Lovell would try to put in a word about the allowance to be made for varying custom, temperament, religions, in different countries; "the depraved inclinations of the lower classes *must* be the same everywhere." Here was blackest confirmation of her opinions! Here was refutation direct of all fine sentimental theories about the necessity of giving these light-hearted peasants their innocent amusements! Here was proof incontestable of what such amusement and such theories led to! In the absence of her master and mistress—doubtless when Archie, poor child, was asleep—this creature had dressed herself up in all the finery she could collect; gone off to some guingette, some Godless place of unhallowed out-of-door revelry, and waltzed there (in muslin that cost two francs fifty centimes the mètre) till morning.

"Well for me if my trinkets are right," thought Bettina. "Well for me if the light-hearted peasant did not make herself up a cap out of my best point-lace!" And actually bristling with rage, so vividly did this revolting image rise before her imagination, she stalked off, bearing on her arm the muslin skirt,

the direct and positive proof of the *corpus delicti*, into her own apartment.

A moment's glance told her that her point d'Alençon was intact, and her jewel-box also. "The woman would not risk a felony," she thought, with crushing bitterness. "Point-lace and trinkets would have set the secret police upon her track at once." The secret police was one of Bettina's strongest beliefs; was, indeed, the only portion of the French nation for whom she had the faintest respect. "Pocket-handkerchiefs, silk stockings, the nice etceteras of the toilet, would be nearer her mark."

However, not a handkerchief, not a stocking, not an etcetera of any kind was missing; and Bettina was about to give up further search, half satisfied, half in disappointment—so inscrutable is woman's nature!—when her eyes fell upon a minute portion of silver-paper, sticking out from one corner of the lid of her best parasol case; the grey silk that dear Madame Bonnechose of Amiens had presented to her on New Year's-day. To open the case, to unfold the paper wrappings, and put up the parasol, was the work of a second: and now—now a sight did meet Mrs. Lovell's gaze which made the blood turn to fire within her veins. The parasol which she had last worn on Easter Sunday, had last gazed at in pristine immaculate purity, was ridged, engrained, covered with marks of black; a certain wavy appearance round the edge of these defilements showed that a guilty hand had tried in vain to rub them out, and a faint smell of benzine, extracted doubtless from her own bottle on the chimney-piece, told how the commission of the whole crime must have been of recent date.

"She could not have worn a parasol at night;" this was Mrs. Lovell's first thought. "Then Archie must have given her leave to go out in the day-time," her second. And resolved to bring the offender to instant and condign punishment, she went forth that moment into the corridor and called aloud, and in no sweet or conciliatory tone, to her stepdaughter to come to her.

Archie had been in the house about five minutes and was sitting alone in the salon in her walking dress, thinking still of the blessings of Philistinism, when she heard the sharp metallic ring of Mrs. Lovell's voice.

"Oh, now for the old story," thought the girl; "so many buttons wanting, so many boots spoilt, so many dresses at the wash. What a pleasant preface to all that I have got to say!" And she sauntered slowly off to Bettina's room, stopping to look out of every window she passed on the way, and singing aloud little Italian snatches about republicanism and liberty, as it was her habit to do whenever she felt that one of her step-mother's sermons was in store for her.

"Well, Bettina, child, what is it?" she cried, as she entered the room, throwing up her sailor's hat in the air and catching it as she walked. "Fourteen hooks and eyes, twenty-two buttons, a dozen——"

And then Miss Lovell stopped short—stopped short; and as long as she lived, I fancy, never played at ball with her hat again! Ostentatiously out-spread upon two chairs before her was the white muslin skirt; the grey parasol open on the floor; the whole air of the room faintly redolent of benzine; and Bettina, like an angry spirit, standing, pointing, with heated face

and vengeful eyes, to these mute evidences of her guilt.

"You—you want me, Bettina?" she stammered.

Mrs. Lovell for answer walked straight up to the door, shut and locked it, and then returned to her stepdaughter's side. "Archie," she said, "I don't say to you, tell me the truth. That, I believe, you always do. I ask you a plain question, and know that you will answer it on your honour. Why did you let Jeanneton go out after all I said to you?"

"Because she wanted to go," said Archie, her eyes sinking on the floor. "She wanted a holiday, and I thought it hard she should keep in, with only me to wait on, and I let her go."

"At what time?"

"At about two or three—I really did not look at the clock."

"And when did she return?"

"When did she return?" faltered the girl, her heart beating so loud that she thought Bettina must have heard its throbs.

"Yes: when did she return? Speak out, child. I am not going to be angry with you."

"She came back—oh, Bettina, don't send her away—don't do anything to prevent other people taking her when we're gone. She came back this morning about eight. You know her village is a good two leagues away. I know she wanted to go and see her grandfather——"

"Her grandfather!" cried Bettina, in the tone which among women of her stamp so admirably takes the place of the strong words current among wicked men; "her grandfather, indeed. Yes, I suppose so. Light-

hearted foreign peasants must have their amusements; your papa says, and their family affections too: *their grandfathers!* and must visit them in their mistress's clothes: clear muslin slips at two-fifty the mètre, and French grey parasols. Oh, certainly!"

Mrs. Lovell seated herself in a position of acrid discomfort upon about three inches of a heavily-piled chair; and tapped one of her feet viciously upon the floor for a minute or so. "I don't know that I was ever so insulted by a servant in my life before," she burst forth at last. "And it's not for the worth of the things alone—not for the worth of the things she has destroyed—but for her insolence in wearing them, and her cruelty in leaving you. Away all night, and you, child as you are, here alone! You might have been murdered! we might have lost every ounce of plate we are worth! but she shall go this day. Don't speak a word, Archie, don't speak a word." Bettina's eyes were in a blaze. "I'm not angry with you now, but I shall be if you speak a word. She shall go this day. A parasol that would have lasted me for years, and worked in to the very grain of the silk with this filthy benzine. Let no one ever tell me French servants are not depraved again—depraved to the very core!"

Then Archie raised her eyes to her stepmother's face: "Bettina," she cried, with desperate courage, "you are wrong. It was not Jeanneton who took the parasol, but me. I wanted to look nice, and I put on my new slip for a dress, and took your parasol, and I tried to clean it this morning, so that you shouldn't know, and—and somehow the stuff made it run, and I'll save all my money, and buy you another when we

go to England!" she added, piteously. "Indeed, indeed I will, Bettina."

Mrs. Lovell rose; and without saying a word re-examined the muslin skirt, breadth by breadth, the torn hem, the disorganized gathers, the half-yard of black mud for trimming. "Archie," she said, when her examination was over; "you are not telling me the truth. You are trying to screen Jeanneton, but it will not do. Where do you mean to tell me that you wore these things?"

"On the pier first," began Archie, with thickening breath.

"But on the pier there is no black mud at all," interrupted Bettina; "and on the pier you would not have had your clothes torn off your back: and on the pier the parasol would not have got grimed in dirt. Dirt! dirt is no word for it. 'Tis simply black—London black! and what beats my comprehension to understand is how the woman, vicious as she is, could have contrived to get it into such a state."

And now Archie, with hands tight clasped over her beating heart, felt that the time had come when she must speak. "London black. You are quite right. That's what it is, Bettina, and I tell you I did it, and Jeanneton is no more to blame than you."

Bettina stared at her in blank stupefaction. "I don't know what you mean, child," she cried, feeling frightened, she knew not why. "I don't know what nonsense this is that you are trying to tell me. You! you have never been in London since you were born."

"And if I was to tell you that I *have*!" exclaimed Archie, with sudden energy; "that I walked down to the pier to see Mr. Durant off, and then the sea looked

so nice that I went out with him in a boat, and then—only to see it, you know—I went on board the steamer, and it started before I knew what I was about, and I went on to London, and stayed there two hours or more, and came back in the middle of the night by myself—if I was to tell you all this, and declare it to be true, what should you say to me, Bettina?”

The parasol, the skirt, dropped out of Mrs. Lovell's hands: a sickly greenish hue overspread her face.

“Does anybody know?” she gasped. The strongest instinct of her nature holding her true, even in an exigence like this, to the sacred cause of conventionality rather than of abstract right.

“No one,” answered Archie, boldly; “or to the best of my belief no one. Jeanneton had left before I started, and there was no one on the pier when I came back this morning—except Captain Waters, and I don't believe it possible that he could have seen me.”

“And you—were in London—alone—with Mr. Durant?” But no words, no punctuation, can express the series of little spasms with which Bettina jerked out these questions. “Alone, you say, and they live close to your father's rectory. Archie, miserable child, do you know what this is that you have done?”

“Certainly, I know,” cried Miss Lovell, not without a half-smile at the ludicrous stony terror of Bettina's face. “I went on board the steamer, foolishly I'll allow, and off it started, and—”

“And you have ruined us! Just that. Ruined your father and me and yourself! Now laugh if you

like!" Mrs. Lovell wept. "After the religious way I've brought you up," she sobbed, "and to choose the very time when your papa is made a dignitary of the church to disgrace yourself—"

And she rocked herself in a manner highly suggestive of hysterics from side to side as she sat.

Archie watched her stepmother with a curious set look about her handsome lips; a curious hard expression in her blue eyes. "You are thoroughly unjust to me, Bettina," she said at last. "I am as sorry about the parasol as you can be, and about the expense too, for we shall have to send Mr. Durant forty-two shillings and sixpence that he lent me on the journey, and I know now I was foolish to go on board the steamer, or even to see him off at all if you like. But when you use such words as disgrace and ruin, I say you are unjust. I have done nothing wrong. I have disgraced nobody."

And she walked across the room and seated herself sullenly by the window; the window from whence she had watched Ralph Seton arrive that morning. "If I had told papa first, as I ought to have done, I shouldn't have been judged so harshly!" she cried, after a silence, broken only by occasional rising sobs on the part of Bettina. "Papa will never call me disgraced as long as I do nothing that is really wrong."

"No, your papa would not see disgrace when all other people would see it!" answered Bettina. "His simplicity, his trust, should have kept you straight." Ah, how well do women know where to pierce through the weakest part of each other's armour! "Your papa lives in his clocks and his cabinets, and knows about as much of the world of men and women as a baby.

He would think nothing of it, poor fellow; but when all the world, when his parishioners, when the family at the Court, know of it, it's not very difficult to foretell what they will say of him!"

"And what, pray?" exclaimed Archie, aflush with indignation at the bare mention of her father being lightly spoken of. "Supposing everything known—supposing people should call me foolish or wicked or anything they choose, what has that got to do with papa?"

"Everything," answered Mrs. Lovell, curtly. "It has got everything to do with him, and his good name, and his reputation, and his prospects in life. If you were a boy, Archie—and if it wasn't like disputing with Providence, I wish from my heart you were one—you might be as wild as wild can be. You might commit any crime—forgery even—for I remember there was the Earl of Somebody's eldest son, only I'm too agitated to remember names—and still pull round, and everything be forgotten. But a girl! No false step a girl makes *can* be got over, unless perhaps in the very highest circles, which we are not. Oh, it's very well to say there is no real difference!" This, as Archie, with quivering lips, was about to speak. "And I know the Scripture makes none; and, indeed, I always myself have thought it hard. . . . However"—and Bettina rescued herself with a start from the dreadful depths of heresy to which she was falling—"what we've got to think of is, what the world says. You have done one of the things no woman can ever recover from if it becomes known. You have been away—that I should sit here and say it calmly—for hours and hours in the company of a young man, and your

good name is as much gone—but I'm too agitated, too miserable, to go into details. No honest young girl knowing this would associate with you. No man knowing it would marry you. And as to the county families noticing us—"

Mrs. Lovell covered up her face in her pocket-handkerchief, and for a minute or two there was dead silence between them. Then Archie left her place by the window, crossed the room, and stood erect and tearless, but white to her very lips, by her step-mother's side. "Bettina," she said, in a voice from which all the old fresh childish ring seemed to have suddenly died, "is this true that you are telling me? Would papa be so badly spoken of if this thing that I have done got known?"

"He would be bli—bli—blighted," sobbed Bettina, fiercely. "For another man it would be bad enough, but for a clergyman such disgrace—"

"That will do," interrupted Archie. "You need not repeat that word so often, I think. And no one would marry me!" with a little hard attempt at a laugh at this; "and the families in the county wouldn't know us! Would they continue to be on terms with Mr. Gerald Durant, do you suppose?"

"Archie, don't drive me wild by asking such absurd questions! You, a girl of seventeen, to talk like a child of seven! Mr. Gerald Durant! Why, of course, people would look upon the affair as something rather in his favour than otherwise. Who ever thinks worse of a young man for such an escapade as this?"

"But Mr. Durant is eight years older than me, Bettina. If going to London with him was a thing to disgrace me so fearfully, he must have known it, and

I would have landed at Calais, when the steamer stopped, if he had only spoken a word of all this. I went on, as I told him, because a number of the Morteville people were there, and I thought papa would be hurt if they got up a story about my landing so far away from home alone. Why didn't Mr. Durant save me when he might have done it?"

"Because no one ever saves anybody," said Bettina, bringing out this clinching truth with stinging emphasis. "Any one on earth hearing the story would say that *you* were to blame throughout, and that Mr. Durant just acted as any other young man would have done under the circumstances. Save you! If you had attended more to your religious exercises, Archie, to the books, the evening readings you have made so light of, you wouldn't have looked to anything but yourself, and your own self-respect, to save you when the time of temptation came."

"Ah, unfortunately I was not remembering myself at all just then—only papa." And then she turned away, and pacing hurriedly up and down the room, began to think—not of her own folly; of her own threatened shame; of the share Gerald had really had in her guilt; of Bettina's, of the world's injustice: these thoughts were for the future—but of her father. Her father on the threshold of a new life, and with all the honour and peace that would have made that life sweet to him, darkened by *her*.

"Bettina," she exclaimed, stopping at last in her walk, "I don't see the absolute necessity of this story of mine ever being known; do you?"

"That entirely depends," said Mrs. Lovell, drearily, her mind at once taking hold of the practical, not the

moral, difficulty of the case. "In the first place, this Mr. Gerald Durant will be quite sure some day to talk about it all himself—"

"No," interrupted Archie, "I am sure he won't—weak and vain though he may be!" she added, with a suppressed bitterness very new to hear in her voice.

"Well, perhaps not," answered Bettina, "though I would never trust any man long with a secret that was flattering to his own vanity. The next thing is, did any one see you when you landed here? You may think not, but, depend upon it, some one did. I've remarked all my life that if you have got on a new dress, or are walking with a good acquaintance, or successful in any way, people seem to keep indoors on purpose rather than see you; but the moment you're looking shabby or poor, or walking with somebody you are ashamed of, you seem to meet everybody you know in the world in flocks. Of course, some one saw you. Why, you said just now that Captain Waters met you on the pier when you landed."

"But if—if I could be sure no one else saw me, or of not being betrayed by him, would you think it right, for papa's sake I mean, Bettina, that we should try to hush the story of all this up?"

"I think," said Bettina, with solemn energy, "that we should be wicked and ungrateful to Providence if we did not do everything in our power to hush it up! I think that if, by extraordinary good fortune, you did go and return unseen (which I cannot believe), we ought never, even among ourselves, to let this thing be spoken of again. You are young, child,"—and for the first time Bettina's face began to soften at the sight of the girl's rigid, tight-clasped hands and wide-

open tearless eyes—"and I'm not harsh on you in my heart, only I know it *is* just one of the things there is no getting over, and Mr. Durant engaged to his cousin, too—which of course would make all the family harder upon you—and after the way I have brought you up! and just when your papa has been made a dignitary of the church and everything . . . however, we'll talk over what can be done, and in the right frame, Archie, the right and humble frame upon which alone, poor worms of an hour as we are! we can expect a blessing."

After which curious confusion of entomological and other metaphors, Mrs. Lovell, with the peculiar tottering gait which women of her way of thinking invariably assume under trouble, went off to her own apartment for her smelling-salts, a clean pocket-handkerchief, and a pile of good books, with which armoury of affliction she presently returned, evidently determined to make a night of it in her step-daughter's room.

But her step-daughter had no such intention for her. Her first horror over at hearing the position in which she stood put into words, Archie Lovell's courage, determination, stout rebellious spirit, all returned to her. "Bettina," she said, catching hold of her step-mother's arm with a suddenness that in her present weak state flattened her up, smelling-salts, good books, and all, against the door, and wearing to Mrs. Lovell's horror, something of the old devil-may-care expression on her face, "it's a settled thing, is it? I must do my best first to get Captain Waters to be silent, and for ourselves we are going, if we can, to tell a falsehood, any number of falsehoods, you and I, about this journey of mine to London?"

"Tell—oh, Archie! I hope we shall never have to speak of it even while we live."

"Very well, Bettina, we'll put it as prettily as we can. Not tell, but act falsehoods. First to papa, of course, for if he knew a thing—poor papa!" her voice faltering, "every one else in the world would know it too; next to the whole of the parishioners, churchwardens, whatever the people are called that belong to rectors, when I stand by and hear how I have never been in England before, et cetera; to the family at the Court, above all; and to Major Seton; and to, or rather with, Mr. Durant when I see him; and some day," with the little hard laugh again, "to any happy man whom we can deceive into wanting to marry me? This we have decided upon doing—haven't we?"

"Oh, Archie, don't look so hardened! don't laugh, child, when you ought to be on your bended knees, praying that your heart of stone might be changed into a heart of flesh! It's very wicked of you to use such a word as falsehood at all. There are circumstances in which even on the highest authority we know that concealment is permitted. At chapter ten——"

"Bettina," interrupted Archie, with the blood mounting crimson to her forehead, and stamping one little foot angrily on the floor, "for mercy's sake let us have none of this, please! I have done a foolish thing that lasted one day, and now I am going to do a mean one that will last all the days of my life! And of my own free will, mind, and not for papa's sake alone. I don't want to be disgraced. I don't want not to be noticed. I don't want to think that no one would marry me—but I won't have any goody talk about it! I won't hear of texts that bear us out in our meanness—as

if you couldn't distort some text for everything wicked that was ever done! and above all I won't have tears and lamentations and smelling-bottles. If we can hush it all up there is no great harm done; and if we cannot, we cannot. In either case there is no use crying and bemoaning and pretending to pray to heaven when we are only hoping we shan't be found out on earth. You've been piling up all papa's clothes into pyramids as usual, I see, Bettina; and now the best thing you can do is to go and write your list out, and put them in their places again."

And Miss Lovell burst into a fit of laughter that if not thoroughly real was loud enough to reach Mr. Lovell in his painting room at the other side of the house, and make him think, and rejoice to think, how happy his little girl was at the good fortune that had befallen them!

Archie laughed on as she watched Bettina obediently bear back the books and smelling-bottle to her own room; and she sang aloud—the same kind of songs she sang to the two old English ladies in the train—as long as she knew her step-mother's door was open, and that she could be heard. Only when Mrs. Lovell had shut herself in, and when all the house was silent, and the girl felt that she was alone at last, did the songs die on her lips and the laughter too. And then she walked up to her glass and looking hard into her own face for companionship, asked herself, blankly, what manner of shame this was that she had incurred.

Disgrace! Ruin! No young girl, if this story was known, would associate with her: no man would seek to marry her. Bettina said this; and Bettina understood the world; and higher authority than Bettina had

she none. Never in her life before, she thought, had she looked so pretty as at this minute. The bright blood was burning clear through her dark cheeks. A light such as she never knew that they could wear was in her eyes. Her hair, with the evening light in its changing hues, shone, like an aureole of pure gold, around her face.

An intense pity for herself, an intense regret for all that she had newly thrown away, came into her childish heart. "I will not be disgraced, I will not!" she thought, passionately. "I am too good for disgrace and ruin! Major Seton thought I was pretty—didn't his face change when I threw him my myrtle? and Gerald Durant thought so, and liked me better than Lucia, with all her classic lines! I *am* pretty; too pretty not to be liked and admired and loved. If I was old, four or five and twenty, and plain, it would be different. I think I could be honourable and tell the truth then, but not now. I'm only seventeen, and I want people to fall in love with me, and pay me attention, and think me handsome (*piquante, mignonne, belle aux yeux bleus*—those were Gerald's words for me!). I want all the county people to make much of papa and to have me at their parties . . . If I look then as I do now, Gerald will be sure to ask me to dance oftener than Miss Durant the heiress. . . . And Major Seton—ah, how Ralph would despise me if he knew to what I have sunk! what a falsehood I have told him—what a falsehood all my future life is going to be!"

And at the thought of Ralph the mobile nature softened in a moment; the heart of stone, as Bettina would have said, was changed into a heart of flesh.

Archie's head sank upon her breast for a minute or two; her lips quivered piteously; and then a flood of the hottest tears that she had ever shed was the unheroic termination of all her fortitude and all her courage.

Quite late in the evening, as Mr. Lovell was standing before "Troy," his pipe in his mouth, and dreaming dreams of greatness as was his wont, his daughter came in, neither singing nor chattering, but pale, subdued, and silent, and crept up to his side. The daylight had well nigh faded; but Mr. Lovell could see that her face was pinched and white; and that all the glorious tawny hair was pinned up tightly, giving her a strange altered look of womanhood, around her head.

"Archie, my little girl, you are pale," holding her face up between his hands, and scrutinising it closely, "and all your hair pinned and twisted up like an old woman's! Is this some whim of Bettina's, or what?"

"It's my own fancy, papa," she answered, "and you must let me keep it so, please. Now that we are going to England, you know, it wouldn't do for me, at my age, to wear my hair hanging about like a child's." •

"Why not?" said Mr. Lovell, "and what are you but a child? If I like to see you so, why should you care for fashion, Archie?"

She had to turn her face away before she could answer: it caused her such new, such poignant pain to say or look otherwise than as she felt to him: then, after a minute, "I care for what you think of me more than for all the fashion in the world," she said. "You believe that? But I know that there are a great many things I must alter about myself now. Running about

here in Morteville, as Archie Wilson, and with you only a poor artist, you know, dear, I may have been very well"—("Very well, indeed," Mr. Lovell interpolates)—"but living among English people and the daughter of a rector, I should be thought wild and unlike other people, and so I'm going to reform myself at once by braiding up my red hair round my head, and leaving off my sailor's hat and trying if I can to look like a lady, not a boy."

"You will not be as good-looking, child. But of course you and Bettina will do as you choose!"

"And you will like me just the same, papa?" a wistful tremor in her voice. "Whatever I was, plain or pretty, or wicked or good, you would like me just the same?"

"My little one." This was all Mr. Lovell answered: but with what a world of tenderness! every note in the diapason of love softly swept by those three words: "My little one!"

She took one of his hands into hers, and so they stood together, as their way was at this hour, saying little and both gazing at the indistinct glories of "Troy," less unlike nature now than at any other hour in the twenty-four, until the canvas insensibly melted into the grey walls of the painting-room, and Jeanneton's voice was heard generally announcing from the kitchen door, after the manner of a gong or dinner bell, that supper was on the table.

"So ends our last look at Troy," remarked Mr. Lovell, as they turned to go away; "or our last look at it in Morteville-sur-Mer. Seton tells me I am wanted in the parish at once, and to-morrow morning

I shall set about packing up my pictures the first thing."

"So ends the last evening of the poor old life," added Archie, lingering at the threshold of the room where so many peaceful hours of her child's existence had been passed. "Shall we ever be as happy now that we are Philistines as we have been here, I wonder?"

"We shall have four hundred a year, instead of being beggars!" cried Bettina, who had been reading good books and pondering over the chances of discovery, until her temper was anything but sweet. "And I think it quite time for you, for *you*, Archie, to have done with that profane talk about Philistines. *Pour vous, Jeanneton,*" and she turned round with sudden animosity upon the servant: "*je vous dismisse. Ce jour semaine vous allez; and sang caractere, vous souvenez, sang caractere.*"

If their own reputation was to be damaged it was something, Bettina felt, to be able to send forth this worthless creature also, *sang caractere*, to the world. Something. Not a satisfaction, of course. She was too Christian a woman to take any delight in the misfortunes of others. But a duty which, at this season of trial, she had an excessively righteous relish in performing.

CHAPTER II.

A Vampire "At Home."

It was getting on for ten o'clock that night when Captain Waters, in a full suit of black, and with every nice adjunct of dandy evening-dress—primrose gloves, bouquet for the button-hole, lilliputian tie, embroidered shirt—faultlessly complete, sauntered away from the door of the Couronne d'Argent. During the last few days invitations for a high tea to be held by Miss Marks on this third evening of August had been current among the English society of Morteville, and to Miss Marks' house Captain Waters, sorely against the convictions of his life with regard to tea in general, was now going.

Miss Gussy inhabited with her papa a modest lodging in one of the least airy parts of Morteville. Of Mr. Marks it is needless to say more than that he was a frightened-looking, dilapidated old person, consuming a good deal of snuff and very little soap (one of the poor, broken down old men, redolent in France of absinthe, and in England of gin and water, who do possess daughters like Gussy, and live in shady suburbs of shady watering places); to whom on all festive occasions Miss Gussy said briefly, "Go to bed; pa," and he went. Of the lodging, that it was *entre cour et jardin*, surrounded, that is, by high damp walls, take it on whichever side you liked, and pervaded by a nameless flavour of bygone meals, mould, and snuff;

the ghosts perhaps of generations of old lodgers all of the stamp of Mr. Marks: the walls covered with dislocated chalk-drawings—carved frames and all the work of Miss Marks' own fair hand—and the furniture generally belonging to that type of squalid tawdriness, threadbare finery, gilding, decay and dirt combined, which ordinarily characterises the third or fourth class French lodging-houses of towns like Morteville. A type which the pen that drew the boarding-house Vauquer in the *Père Goriot* alone could reproduce in its integrity.

Miss Marks you have already seen; and I have only to record that on this especial evening she wore, in her capacity of hostess, a white muslin frock, with a sash carelessly knotted behind, sleeves tied up on the shoulders, like an infant going to be christened, and a simple bit of blue ribbon in her hair. "As if she was fifteen, not five and thirty," whispered Mrs. Maloney to one of her friends the minute she entered. "A waist a yard and a quarter round, and a sash. *Dear Gussy*, how well you are looking!" and they kiss. "The madonna style of braiding back the hair suits your face so exactly."

Mrs. Maloney herself was in a green silk: in the green silk, rather—the Maloney silk was a case in speaking of which the definite article is admissible. Fearfully and wonderfully full-dressed—to use the favourite irony of the fashion-books—though this ancient beauty loved to be in a ball room, she held it correct taste to appear in what she termed "demmy toilets" at small parties. Hence the green silk, chastely trimmed with imitation Cluny lace, was cut high upon the shoulders, but beautifully less, as one sees in Sir

Peter Lely's portraits, beneath the throat: a style admirably suited to the plump Dolly Varden figure which Mrs. Maloney in her heart believed herself to possess. Rows of inexpensive pearl beads were twisted, repeatedly but in vain, around the yellow shrivelled neck; and under one poor withered ear, playfully nestling amidst hair which "Batchelor's World-famed Fluid" had converted into lustrous purple, shot in side-lights with rainbow hues of pink and green, was a single moss rosebud: emblem of love, and youth, and innocent freshness like its wearer.

As Waters entered the room, his opera-hat under his arm, his eyes fell upon these two young creatures, who both looked up at him with a coy little start as he approached; and intent upon getting over the work before him as quickly as possible he at once walked across the room in his quiet well-bred way, and after saluting Miss Marks and receiving her playful reproaches for being so late, seated himself on a pile of music-books—the safest resting-place in the room Captain Waters thought—at Mrs. Maloney's side.

"Not playing whist, Mrs. Maloney?" he remarked, glancing towards a pair of quivering shoulders, and one mammoth elbow, on his right, and forming inductive guesses—as a comparative anatomist from the shin-bone of a megatherium might infer the history of an epoch—as to the probable existence of Mrs. O'Rourke's partner, adversaries, and a whist-table. "How is it that you and Miss Marks are both sitting out to-night?"

"Me?" cried the girl Gussy, giddily, if not with the grammar one would have expected from an author of her repute. "Me play whist? Why, you have to

remember all the horrid cards, and sit ever so long without opening your lips! Fancy me being silent and remembering anything for two minutes together." Archly this, and with a toss of her head and a little scream such as children do unconsciously break forth with in the bib-and-tucker stage of existence. "We have been playing Beggar-my-neighbour for bonbons, Captain Waters," she added with pretty simplicity, "and Mr. Montacute, dreadful creature! has already beaten me out of two games."

At the mention of Mr. Montacute, Waters looked more closely behind the screen of Miss Gussy's voluminous muslin draperies, and at last perceived, very blushing and frightened, little Willie Montacute, well secured in a corner, and helplessly grasping a time-honoured and adhesive pack of cards in his hand. Miss Marks, when she did run a victim to earth, had a plan of stopping him by thus outstretching herself, bodily as it were, before the path to freedom; and with very young boys, or very feeble old men, generally found the feint, for one evening, a successful one.

"Ah, Willie, my boy, how are you?" said Waters. "On your feet again, then, after your sea-sickness? Would you believe it, Mrs. Maloney, though the sea was as smooth as glass, that fellow managed to be ill last night on our way from Calais here?"

"There was a deuced heavy swell," said Master Montacute, "and it wasn't really the sea at all, but the poisonous dinner we got at Calais—"

"Of course," interrupted Waters, good humouredly; he is in high good humour with every one this evening. "It is never the sea that makes people ill. You ought to have come with us," he added, turning carelessly to

Mrs. Maloney. "We had a very pleasant day, barring the heat, and saw a good deal, really, that was worth seeing."

"Ahem, so I hear!" answered the Maloney, drawing down her thin upper lip with unction; "a great deal, that, in one deplorable sense, *was* very well worth seeing, Captain Waters."

Waters raised his eyes for half a second to her face, and knew that his suspicions were correct: that he had done right in coming to this atrocious tea-party after all. "The peasants?" he suggested innocently. "Well, in masses they did look picturesque, didn't they, Miss Marks? Just when Monseigneur was blessing them, and with flags waving and incense swinging—but when you see them close, the ugliness of the women in this part of France is something, really—"

"Oh, peasants!" interrupted Mrs. Maloney, tapping Waters upon the arm with her fan with shrivelled playfulness. "Sure you know as well as I do, Captain Waters, that it's not peasants I'm thinking of."

"What, then?" asked Waters, putting up his eyeglass and looking about him with the dazed look that his white inanimate face was so well fitted to express. "Miss Marks, you were there. What was this interesting sight that I had the stupidity to miss at Calais?"

"Are you sure you did miss it?" said Gussy, lowering her voice, and bringing her great birdlike eyes to bear upon Waters in a way that, it is only just to state, he never would have allowed save in the execution of business. "You certainly were in the best

position on the pier for seeing everything when it occurred."

Waters was silent: then a faint smile just parted his lips, and for a minute or two he examined curiously the bunch of charms which hung from his watch-chain. "Ladies are terribly sharp observers," he remarked, at length; "but I positively do not know what you mean on this particular occasion. My friend Durant was on board an excursion steamer bound for London, and I spoke to him. Had this anything to do with the circumstances you are speaking of?"

"Oh, Captain Waters, how ridiculous you are to pretend such innocence!" cried Gussy, warming. "When you *must* have seen just as plain as I did."

"Seen what? I give you my honour I am as utterly in the dark as ever."

But even this valuable offer did not change Miss Marks in her opinions. "I can tell by your face that you know everything, Captain Waters. Mr. Durant had a companion with him, and that companion was—Archie Wilson!"

Captain Waters literally started two inches from the music books; his eyeglass fell down with a crash against the admirable counterfeits of diamonds that he wore as shirt studs. "Miss Wilson? Oh!" with a change of countenance that, as a bit of finished drawing-room comedy, would not have discredited Charles Mathews himself. "That is excellent! Durant run away with Miss Wilson! I must tell him about this the first letter I write. Why, Archie Wilson is in Morteville at this minute," he added, keenly noting all the time the effect that his abilities were producing on

his audience. "I was talking to her and her father not three hours ago at the door of their own house."

"Oh, so we hear!" cried the Maloney, bridling; "so we hear. Miss Wilson is back in Morteville already, and in my humble opinion this shows pretty clearly what kind of person she is. After an esclandre of this kind to dare to face us all again! Only that—really," casting down her eyes timidly, "I don't know the subject is one fit for us to discuss, I should say that Archie Wilson would have shown herself to be a shade—a shade less hardened if she had stopped away from Morteville altogether!"

Whereupon Captain Waters laughed—smiled, I mean. The man had not laughed for years. "I never heard a better thing than this in my life!" he exclaimed; "never. What, in the name of everything that is ridiculous, Mrs. Maloney, makes you fix upon Archie Lovell as Durant's companion?"

"Oh, my authority is Miss Marks!" answered Maloney, promptly. "Let Miss Marks speak for herself. I know nothing whatever about it, except what Miss Marks has told me."

"Well, then, Miss Marks, will you tell me, please? I should not like to lose a word of this new and horrible scandal about Archie Wilson."

And thus adjured, Gussy spoke. She was not as near as Captain Waters, of course, but she saw Archie Wilson distinctly at Mr. Durant's side. Recognised the sailor's hat and blue veil; the white dress; recognised the whole figure of the girl herself. Not her face, certainly, for her veil was down; and the Miss Montacutes and Mr. Montacute—here Willie, with vehement blushes, begged that he might not be brought

forward in any way—recognised her, too. By what steamer Miss Wilson might have returned she knew not. That Miss Wilson was Mr. Durant's companion on board the steamer that stopped at the Calais Pier she would declare on oath.

"And I," said Waters, rising quietly from his place, and speaking in an intentionally clear and distinct voice, "I will declare, on oath, that the whole story is impossible! I went down this morning to see the first steamer arrive from Folkestone, and Archie Wilson was on the pier before me. I stood not twenty paces from her as I waited to see the steamer come in."

A general hush: even the whist-players interested—for every one in the room, every English person in Morteville, had already heard Miss Marks' whispered story of Archie's flight. "I happen," continued Waters, "luckily for my friend's daughter, to be able to swear to her being on the pier before the arrival of the steamer this morning, and if you like it, Miss Marks, I can do more. I can tell you who the young person you saw on board the Lord of the Isles really was."

"Oh, I'm sure I want to hear no more about it!" cried Gussy, growing scarlet as every pair of eyes in the room turned upon her. "If it was not Archie Wilson, and of course you have proved to us it was not, Captain Waters, I will say no more about it—and will never trust the evidence of my eyes again while I live!" she added, under her breath.

"Well," said Waters, deliberately, and stroking his floss-silk moustache into infinitesimal points while he looked at Gussy's face, "as for saying no more about

it, Miss Marks, I don't know. When an accusation as serious as this has been openly brought against a lady, I conceive it to be the duty of the accusers to contradict what they have stated as soon as they are themselves convinced of their mistake."

The voice of Mrs. O'Rourke, with the sound it ever assumed after dinner—a hollow rumbling sound, as of a volcano deadened by the weight of much superincumbent strata—here remarked, "There were some persons whom no scandal could damage. An accusation more or less against Archie Wilson would really matter little."

"The remark is just," said Waters, with cold impertinence; he knew himself to be on the eve of leaving Morteville, and able therefore to be indifferent about Mrs. O'Rourke's dinners—"the application faulty. There are persons, Mrs. O'Rourke—whose authority, but yours, should one accept on such a point?—whom no scandal could damage, but Archie Wilson is not one of them. Archie Wilson!" he interrupted himself, suddenly, and as if he had not been gradually working up to this climax from the first moment he entered the room, "no, I will speak of her so no longer. The necessity for the incognito is over. Archie Lovell is the daughter of a man of position and birth. Her father is the rector of Hatton in Staffordshire, her grandfather is Lord Lovell, and it is unfit that the ribald talk of Morteville tongues should even go near her. Ladies, of course, have their own prerogative!" added Waters, looking with a sneer at Mrs. Maloney and Miss Marks. "They may talk as they choose without peril. If any man still thinks that Miss Lovell accompanied Durant away from Morteville, I should be

very happy to talk over the matter with him in any spirit or at any time that he chooses."

And Waters glanced round him with the warlike aspect he had learnt in Italian cafés, and twirled up his well-waxed moustaches till little Willie Montacute thanked his stars he, for one, had not been fool enough to give an opinion in the matter. Reckless bravery, never terminating in bloodshed, was one of Waters' leading characteristics; and the present moment, with a room full of women, one little boy, and three trembling old gentlemen, all rather deaf, and mildly playing at threepenny whist, was, he felt, just an occasion to display it.

"Rector of Hatton—*Lord* Lovell!" gasped Gussy; no one showing any eagerness in the picking up of Captain Waters' gauntlet. "Well, it's very strange, but I always did think Mr.—Mr. Lovell had a look of birth about him, and Archie, if you recollect, Mrs. Maloney?" Maloney looks stonily forgetful of everything. "I've often said to you, I thought there was something *distingué* about her face. Poor little girl, I'm sure I'm very glad this last story has all turned out to be a mistake!"

"And will do your best, I am convinced," said Waters, with emphasis, "to see that the story is contradicted. Ladies, I have the honour of wishing you good-night."

After which—regardless of conviviality in the form of *vin-ordinaire* negus, four *brioche*s on one plate, and three *pâtés* on another, that a hired old waiter, mouldy like everything else about the house, was bearing in upon a tea-tray—Captain Waters bowed himself out of the presence; and the ladies were left alone. Alone,

to digest the news as best they might: to affect to doubt: to trust Captain Waters was not deceived: and to form immediate plans, each one of them in her heart, for letting the Lovells know that it was never her, oh, never! who said any of the unkind things that certainly *had* been said in Morteville about dear little Archie.

Can worse be recorded of these women? When all they knew of Archie Lovell was that she was fresh, fair, and young, they reviled her. When they were assured of her social superiority to themselves ("her father an honourable," thought Gussy, "her grandfather a lord! oh, if I can only get her to write to me!") they were ready in an instant to grovel at her feet. Can human meanness go further?

As Waters was walking back to his hotel, he thought with a feeling of positive sickness over that last hour's work he had gone through. In men like him—men from whose hearts the very last traditions of honour have fled—the hereditary finer instincts of gentlemen do occasionally linger still. Of all this Morteville vampire brood, Waters was, in fact, perhaps the most morally worthless; ten minutes ago had declared himself ready to take his oath to a falsehood; was organising a scheme to make the secret of a child of seventeen "a property;" had defended her to-night only to get the whole speculation more securely into his own hands—not actually with any idea of immediate gain, but as a lien, a possible hold, upon her through every year of her future life. And still to himself he seemed a prince among them all. He might, for money, have to do queer things, to put up with queer acquaintance now and then; but to the lowest dregs of all, to the

standard of the O'Rourke and Maloney, he felt that he could never sink. He might be a scoundrel; a good many well-born men have been that; one of a *canaille* like this, never!

Noblesse oblige. As a lad—with keen vividness old memories throng upon him as he walks slowly home to his hotel now: as a lad—one false step about money had cast him down, certainly, from the level of his peers. But no false step, no number of false steps, can ever thoroughly drain out the blue blood from a man's veins. Was he, in truth, so very dishonourable, then, he wonders? He doesn't know now; he knows only that he was very foolish, and that he got found out; and was banished from his father's house, and from his club, and from society generally. Banished from every respectable employment that he was fitted for; and as he was too well-born and nurtured to work, forced in some measure to take up a profession that he was fitted for, but which was not respectable. The profession of living about in places like Homburg, Florence, Morte-ville-sur-mer, and making money out of every man, woman, or child he comes across.

Standing in the pure summer night—he feels he wants a great deal of fresh air to renew the oxygen that Miss Marks' rooms have exhausted from his delicate lungs—Waters looks back upon the bygone years and thinks sorrowfully (a man is never so callous but that, at times, he can be tender over himself) upon the hard lines on which his life has fallen! the ill-luck that now, in his middle age, makes him a waif among such people as these in Morteville, instead of a country gentleman like his elder brother; or a guardsman, like his younger one, the fool Dolly; or a man deep in red

tape like his cousin—whose sums he used to do at school; or a foreign diplomatist, high in honour and repute, like the other cousin—who used to steal his marbles when he was asleep. He was a cleverer and a better boy than any of them, he remembers; and they are—where they are! and he is here—a card-sharper, a lonely wretch, whose solace is in brandy and tobacco, and whose associates are such people as these he has just left. And everything's a fluke! falling to work resignedly at cigarette-making; and it's a great thing for a man to feel, however unfortunate he is, that he is a gentleman by birth: that there are depths of mean and paltry degradation to which he can never sink!

And then he chinks out with greater precision to himself the exact words in which he shall conduct his interview to-morrow with Miss Lovell.

CHAPTER III.

Le Renard prêche aux Poules!

HE kept to his appointment at eleven, punctually; and found Archie already waiting for him on the plateau. The plateau, as every one knows, is the name given to the portion of the sea walk immediately in front of the Morteville établissement; and as eleven o'clock is here, as in other French watering-places, the hour when the promenades and beach are most crowded, the meeting of Captain Waters and Miss Lovell was not likely, even among the English residents of the place, to attract observation. As for the French, never much prone to scandal, they were at the présent time engaged to a man. One section dancing about in the sea in the fantastic serge suits that a paternal imperial government imposes upon its children; another ranged on tiers of chairs upon the beach, watching them, with the intense interest an English mind can never thoroughly understand; a third, still by the aid of opera-glasses well within view of their friends in the sea, drinking *consommés*, smoking, reading the papers, and playing dominoes beneath the canvas awning outside the établissement.

Waters came up, his hat in his hand, to Archie, who was walking slowly up and down the plateau in one of the least crowded parts, evidently and without concealment waiting for him. She was paler than usual, and her hair, plainly braided back in the new fashion

she had adopted, gave an aged and worn look to her face that Waters was not slow to notice.

"What a different scene all this is to the kind of thing one meets with in our English watering-places," he remarked, as a matter of course turning round and walking by her side; "I am not quite sure after all, though, that the advantage is on our side."

"I don't know," said Archie, coldly; "I have never been in England,—I mean never at an English watering-place."

"Then you have been spared witnessing as much human dullness as can be collected together at one time and in one place," Captain Waters answered, without noticing her abrupt, almost sullen manner. "We go to the sea expressly to bore ourselves, the French to escape from being bored; and I must say I think they are right, although I can't join in the raptures Frenchmen go into about some of their seaside fashions,—the marine costume of the Parisiennes, for example,—with regard to beauty. Do you read French novels, Miss Lovell?"

"I do not."

"A very good thing for you"—the shorter her answers the pleasanter grew the tone of Waters' voice—"a very good thing indeed. English people in general taboo French novels, because they are supposed to be wrong, but the fact is they are only horribly stupid, as stupid very nearly as English ones. However—what was I going to say?—oh, the other day I read in a French novel, and a very excellent one, a description of how a lovely Parisienne looks in her black serge dress in the water. 'Une divinité des eaux!'" Waters speaks French like a Frenchman. "'Vous

auriez dit une statue de marbre noir à tête blanche. Depuis la pointe de ses jolis pieds jusqu' à ses grands cheveux elle défiait la critique la plus malveillante. Il n'y avait qu' à tomber à genoux devant cet admirable corps!' Now, Miss Lovell, without being the most spiteful critic in the world, I must confess that French women in the water look to me very much more like half-drowned brown rats than like marble statues or divinities. You agree with me?"

She made him no answer whatever; only walked along by his side, her head turned away from him, without the ghost of a smile or of response from her lips; and Waters began to see that whatever he wanted to say he must say without preamble, without assistance of any kind from his companion. "It is the same in everything," he remarked presently; "five hundred people in France sit on the burning sand to watch five hundred other people, ridiculously dressed, but whom they think marble divinities, jump up and down in the water, and the English call the whole scene by very hard names indeed. We, on the other hand, do many things, or rather our young ladies do, which French convention look upon with absolute horror. You don't mind a cigarette?—thanks." And he made and lit one, while Miss Lovell still walked on silent, and with averted scornful face, by his side.

And then Captain Waters spoke out. "I am very glad, Miss Lovell, that I happened to be on the pier when the steamer arrived from England yesterday morning—glad for every reason. Do you know—but I need not ask; how should you?—that a most absurd, a most malicious story is being circulated in Morteville at the present moment——"

"About—about me?" she interrupted, with quivering lips, and still keeping her face turned aside from him.

"Well, yes; I am sorry to say, about you. I don't know that I should say it is being circulated at this present moment, for I have done my best to stop it; but up to a very late hour yesterday it was the talk of all the English here that—forgive me even for repeating it—that you had gone away to London in the same steamer with Durant."

Miss Lovell acted no surprise; made no attempt at denial. "Go on, if you please," she said, abruptly. "This is not all, I suppose. Tell me everything you have got to say."

"Well, Miss Lovell, judging from a word that fell from your father's lips when I was speaking to him yesterday, I felt sure that—that this Morteville story ought to be looked upon as an invention. Mr. Lovell hinted, I think, that you were at home alone yesterday, and (as it is physically impossible for any person to be in two places at once) I have taken upon myself to contradict the story as a pure and malignant invention."

"And they believed you?" she cried quickly; and looking round at his face for the first time. "Captain Waters, I hope you will be good enough to tell me plainly. Have you made these people believe that what was stated was—false?" But her voice shook with the effort it cost her to bring out these words.

"Yes," he answered, with slow intentional deliberation that tortured her to the utmost. "I believe I may say now that the story is crushed—trodden under

foot. It was no easy matter to do, I can assure you," he added. "There were several people besides myself on the Calais pier, and it became simply and literally a matter of hard swearing as to whether Mr. Durant's companion was or was not yourself."

"And you swore it was not me?"

"I did. I declared also that I saw you on the pier this morning before the arrival of the first steamer from England."

As Waters said this, Miss Lovell, the daughter of the Rector of Hatton, drew a long breath of relief. Archie Wilson, the unfearing, uncompromising little Bohemian of old days, felt that never in all her seventeen years of life had she had such cause to blush for herself before. A degradation for which she knew no name, a shame from which her child's heart shrank, even while reason bid her play her part out, dyed her face scarlet as she walked by Captain Waters' side, and heard him recount the falsehoods that he had told to save her.

"I am much obliged to you;" after a pause she said this, and in a stiff, measured tone, as if she was repeating something that she had painfully learnt by rote, and felt herself forced to say: "I don't know why you took my part at all. I don't ask why; but I thank you for papa and myself."

"And you will feel assured of my silence, Miss Lovell? You will feel assured that anything that I may accidentally happen to have witnessed will be a secret that I shall keep sacred while I live?"

"You are very good," was all poor Archie's answer, "and I am much obliged to you." For indeed, she could see no reason either why he had befriended her

now, or why her secret, or anything belonging to her, should be a sacred possession to Captain Waters for the future.

"And if, Miss Lovell, at any future time we meet again, you will let me regard myself in some measure as your friend?" The girl only looked a very faint assent. "I am going to leave Morteville, probably within the next twenty-four hours," he went on, talking in a quick, restless way, as he always did when he was forced to speak of his own affairs; "and perhaps—indeed I think it most likely—my business will detain me for the summer in England. Well, Miss Lovell, you must know that I am—I don't hesitate in saying it—a man with whom life has gone somewhat hard, and at times (horribly frequently such times succeed each other) I don't know where to put my hand on a shilling. It is so at this minute, I swear to you; and ——"

She turned round: she looked at him so full, that Captain Waters' eyes shifted, in spite of all his assurance, from her gaze. "Do you mean, sir"—very distinct and clear her question fell upon his ear—"that you want me to *pay* you? that this wretched secret of mine has a price?"

He smiled, and put up his eye-glass at a group of Parisian divinités des eaux, who happened to pass before them at this moment. "Well, no, Miss Lovell, I must confess that no such idea crossed my mind. No such idea, at all events, as that which your very melodramatic and picturesque language has placed before me! The facts, as we have come to such charmingly plain speaking, are briefly these. A young lady, granddaughter of a peer, daughter of a rector, everything of

the highest respectability, leaves her home in the company of a stranger, and sixteen or eighteen hours later returns—her father and mother, who happen to be away from home, continuing ignorant of the escapade she has indulged in during their absence. Well, this escapade is—we won't use harsh words—a strong measure for a young lady to take, and this one of whom I speak has quite sense enough to keep her own counsel. Unfortunately the secret is not altogether hers. A third person, towards whom the heroine of the story feels rather unreasonably indignant, happens to see the two young people when they are already on their journey to London; also, as luck will have it, watches the young lady when next day she returns, *alone* to France, and——”

“And asks a price for keeping what he saw a secret!” interrupted Archie, undauntedly. “I quite understand you, sir, and all I have to say to you is—you must do your worst! Go, if you choose, and swear to the people here that what you swore to yesterday was false! I would do anything to screen papa, but it's no use;” the tears rising in her eyes as she made the confession. “I have not a ten-franc piece in the world that I can call my own!”

Her mixture of courage and childishness so overcame Captain Waters' sense of humour that, as nearly as he could ever be said to laugh, he laughed. “I am not quite so poor as you think me, Miss Lovell. You needn't tell me you have no sous in your pocket exactly in the tone you would use to a too-persistent beggar in the street! When I asked you to meet me here to-day, I wished simply to put you on your guard with respect to Miss Marks and some other of the

Morteville gossips. When I defended you last night I did what I—or any man,” cried Waters, chivalrously, “must feel compelled by instinct to do when one young, pretty, and helpless woman is attacked by half a dozen others, who are neither young nor pretty, nor helpless for the matter of that. You have no particular cause, I think, to be angry with me. I really could not help recognising you with Durant on board the Lord of the Isles at Calais—now, could I?”

She answered nothing; but stood still waiting for him to finish, and looking at him with flushed face, and with tears still standing in the beautifully-indignant eyes.

“When I spoke of ever meeting you again I thought it right and honourable to explain to you my position—my want of position would be nearer the mark! Pride made me do so, Miss Lovell. When I thought of accepting your father’s kind invitation pride made me explain to you the sort of visitor you would have in me, and then, you know, you interrupted me with a little burst of melodrama about payment and five-franc pieces. A somewhat cruel taunt perhaps to a poor threadbare fellow like me!” Waters looks sentimentally at his coat-sleeve, which is not in the least threadbare; “but you are too young to know the bitterness of your own words. Miss Lovell,” and he took his hat off with mock deference to the ground, “good-by, and set your mind at rest. I am not at all likely to turn traitor: only, when we meet next in the pleasant retirement of Staffordshire, speak to me with a little more kindness—shall I say gratitude?—than you have done this morning!” And he turned from her,

and with his accustomed air of dandy indifference, strolled away in an opposite direction across the sands.

Her secret, so far, was safe, then. And yet, with a sinking heart Archie felt that it had been better every other tongue in Morteville had spoken of her at once than that Captain Waters should track her out in her new English life; that Captain Waters, alone, should have it in his power to betray her!

CHAPTER IV.

Found Drowned.

AT about four o'clock on the day succeeding his dinner-party, Mr. Dennison left his chambers in the Temple and walked forth, with quiet composed demeanour, along the Strand in the direction of the west. He was admirably got up, as usual: frock-coat, well-fitting boots, lavender gloves stitched with black, walking-stick-umbrella: his tie, his linen, his whiskers, all irreproachable. Poor Maggie would want to see him, he said—nay, he thought this, to himself: after the cold parting at his chambers the night before, it was only right that he should go and hold out the olive-branch of peace. He would take her away for one of those country dinners she so loved to Richmond: there would be just time to get off by the five o'clock train if he hurried her in her dressing: and if there was half an hour to spare he would take her round to Regent Street and give her a new bonnet to go in. It *was* hard to a woman's heart, doubtless, to have to wear an old velvet hat in August, poor girl! A French bonnet and a new dress would be the best means of setting everything right between them! And still Mr. Dennison's eyes glanced quickly, nervously, at the placards of every news-shop he passed: his ear greedily drank in every word of dislocated, mispronounced intelligence that the hoarse voices of the news-boys, now issuing forth from the different offices with the evening papers, were shouting around him as he walked along.

When he had got within about thirty or forty yards from the opening to Cecil Street he was forced to stop; so dense a crowd had gathered round a red-and-orange placard placed outside an office door close upon his right.

“Earliest intelligence—Clerk suspected of embezzlement—Horrid case of poisoning in Leeds—Found drowned,” yelled out a boy in accents that might have been Chaldee or Sanscrit; and running each ghastly announcement into the other, so as to render them wholly unintelligible to any save the preternaturally sharpened sense of one of his hearers. “Clerk suspected of embezzlement—Poisoning in Leeds—Found drowned.”

The cold dew started upon Robert Dennison’s forehead; another voice besides the news-boy’s shrill treble made itself heard to him amidst all the uproar of the London streets. “Found drowned.” Why, what nervous fancies were these he had upon him? What interest had he in these vulgar horrors of the penny papers? He wanted quiet and rest; the rest he would get in the green Richmond shades with Maggie. Cecil Street was here close at hand; he would call for her at once, take her to the milliner’s, poor child! and be happy, looking at her pleasure, as in the old days of their love——

And he laid his hand heavily on the news-boy’s shoulder; took and paid for a paper, and walked on with it folded in his hand—keeping his eyes steadily away from the flaming placard, yet seeing, with weird clairvoyance, two words written there, larger, more blood-coloured than the rest!—in the direction of his wife’s lodgings.

Nearly opposite to Cecil Street he came to a small

chop-house or coffee-room; not the sort of place Mr. Dennison would generally have condescended to enter; however, when he had half-passed the window, he suddenly said to himself that he would never be able to keep up in this stifling heat unless he got some iced soda-water, water, fluid of any kind to allay his thirst, and after hesitating irresolutely for a minute, he turned back, and stepped inside the door.

"Iced soda-and-brandy? Yes, sir. Will you take a table, sir?" said the mistress of the establishment, obsequiously, and looking instantly, as all women of her class did look, upon Dennison as a tremendous aristocrat. So Mr. Dennison took a table, one of the three little rounds of marble the room possessed, and turning his face in such a position that no one in the room could witness its expression, opened out his paper and searched it over for the day's news.

"Found drowned. At about ten o'clock last night, two men occupied in a vessel just below London Bridge, heard a sound like the cry of a woman in distress, and immediately afterwards the splash of some heavy body struck the water a few yards, as it seemed, from where the barge was moored. They raised an immediate alarm, and the river police with drags were on the spot at once; but for a long time their search was fruitless. At three o'clock this morning, however, the body of a girl was found, drifted in among some shipping, three or four hundred yards down the river, and bearing evident signs of having been dead some hours. The unfortunate deceased was respectably dressed, and wore a plain gold or marriage ring tied by a piece of ribbon round her throat. The police are already actively engaged in investigating this mysterious tragedy; and

from the fact of a handkerchief that deceased had on her person being marked with a monogram, we shall no doubt, before long, be enabled to present our readers with further and important details."

For a moment Robert Dennison was stunned: felt neither remorse, nor grief, nor pain, nor was sensible of fear; only stared vacantly at the pattern of the gaudy paper on the opposite wall—a filigree trellis-work, with tier above tier of absurd Swiss shepherdesses looking out from between arsenic green leaves. (Will he ever forget that trellis-work, those shepherdesses? In every illness, in every lonely sleepless night, will they not pursue him, the phantom background to all terrible nightmares, while he lives?) What he saw next was, that they had brought him his soda-and-brandy: and with a physical effort, so great as to cause him actual pain, he put out his hand and raised the glass to his lips. Something prevented him from swallowing a drop. The brandy must be bad, he thought. He never could swallow bad brandy. He would go on at once to Maggie, take her away to the country, and And then, abruptly, with sharp, with awful distinctness, all the meaning, all the danger of his position took palpable shape before his mind. A handkerchief marked with a monogram. The police actively engaged already. What if they tracked out Maggie's lodgings—for he felt as if heaven's voice had spoken that it was she—among her things were notes of his; photographs of his; her marriage lines: everything. What if they found how last night she had been to him, to her husband, for shelter, and how he had turned her out—(his own servant, some chance listener on the stairs, might be brought to witness this against him)—turned

her out, in her forlorn despair, to die upon the London streets!

He was a lawyer by nature as well as by profession; and every detail of the situation arranged itself with mechanical clearness, without an effort of volition, almost, before his intelligence. Robert Dennison, this man who had thrust his wife brutally from her rightful place, and who stood in direct extremity of exposure and downfall, seemed, in these first minutes, scarcely more intimately connected with himself than any client would have done whose case had happened to be placed in his hands, and whose sufferings or whose guilt concerned him only in as far as they heightened or lessened the chances of discovery. "Margaret Dennison," said his brain, while his heart kept cold and still, "left her lodgings yesterday evening; went to her husband and was repulsed by him; and to-day is dead. Everything that can mutely identify Robert Dennison as her husband is to be found among the things that she left behind her at her lodgings; and these, unless active measures be taken at once, will be, in all human probability, at the end of a few more hours in the hands of the police—the placards with which the town must soon be covered scarcely failing to arrest the attention of the master or mistress, or servants, of the lodging-house."

Unless active measures be taken at once. What measures? A remark that his wife had made to him last night came back, word for word, before his memory, as if in answer. "I've paid off the lodgings and left them. You may send for my things to-morrow, if you like." This simply was what he had to do. He got up, put the paper in his pocket, paid for the un-

tasted soda-and-brandy, then went out and walked back along the Strand, till he came to a stationer's shop. This he entered, bought a sheet of note-paper and envelope; and leaning on the counter to write, addressed a few lines to the landlady of the house in Cecil Street, begging that Miss Neville's luggage might be sent to her by the bearer. One of Dennison's accomplishments from the time he was a boy had been a trick of imitating admirably the handwriting of any person he chose; and this note was written in the precise half-flourish, half-scrawl of poor Maggie. He signed it "Lucy Neville," the name by which she had passed, sealed it, paid for the paper and envelope—carefully counting the change out of sixpence; then walked on, Cityward still, and with no more hurried step, no more sign of perturbation on his face than usual. Before the archway of a coach or parcel-office, close by the Olympic Theatre, he stopped, looked at his watch, and stepping inside the archway, inquired from a group of three or four men who were standing there if he could get a porter to fetch some luggage for him from Cecil Street? One of the men, a licensed porter, volunteered for the job on the spot; and twenty minutes later, Robert Dennison, who disappeared in the interval—oh, the cycle, the eternity of those twenty minutes!—saw the well-known new portmanteau and bonnet-box that had been the companions of his wedding-tour, driven up before the office door on the roof of a cab.

Maggie had not returned to her lodgings, then: for, up to the present moment, this had been a moral, not an actual certainty with him! "You haven't been long, my man," he said, addressing the porter, "They had the things all ready for you, I suppose."

"Well, yes," the porter answered, "the boxes were standing ready in the hall, and for the matter of that the landlady wasn't over civil in saying they ought to have been taken before noon, when the week was up. And here are the lady's keys, sir," he added, taking something wrapped in a very dirty bit of paper, and giving them to Dennison. "The lady left them on the chimney, and I was to say from Mary, which she arst me—after the landlady were gone—that she'd never let 'em out of her own pocket, and the lady needn't fear but that her things was safe."

"All right," said Dennison, carelessly, but with a strange sense of the way in which chance now, as throughout his life, seemed to be with him. "All right. What do you want for the job? Two shillings—what, for less than half an hour's work? no."

He paid the porter the exact sum that was due to him—nothing more likely, he thought, to awaken suspicion than ever paying any man a farthing more than his due—and jumping into the cab, ordered the driver to go to the Shoreditch Station. When he had got some way along Fleet Street, however, something seemed to make him change his mind; and getting out, he paid and dismissed the cab, deliberately waited with his luggage for three or four minutes just by the open space or foot-passage which leads up to Saint Bride's Church, then hailed another cab and drove back quietly to his own chambers in the Temple. Had his servant been at home, a different and a more involved plan might, perhaps, have been forced upon him. But the boy, by his permission, had gone out for the remainder of the day; and judging with calm dispassionate coolness—the lack of which drives the majority of guilty

men into acts of rash self-betrayal—Dennison decided that the safest place in England for him to go to now would be his own chambers. A better or a weaker man, circumstanced as he was, would have striven, perhaps, to make away with every evidence of his connection with Maggie: all that Dennison felt it imperatively necessary for him to destroy were the proofs of his marriage. He was bold through temperament and through education alike: and on principle ever chose the most open game that could be played. By taking away these things of hers out of London, by attempting to destroy them with every device that the “crooked wisdom” of cunning could suggest, there had been, he knew, a thousand times more risk than in driving with them straight to his own rooms, and, if need be, conducting the first detective officer who should come to question him to the closet where they lay.

The one-armed old pensioner who generally acted as Mr. Dennison’s porter, happened at the moment of his arrival to have gone round to his home in the nearest court to tea; so the cabman, helped by Robert himself, carried up the luggage, without being met by any one, to the second floor; where Mr. Dennison paid and discharged him. The placard “gone out of town” which the boy had hung outside the door of the chambers he took down, as soon as he had unlocked the door and carried the luggage inside. A weaker man would, probably, again have erred on the side of prudence by leaving the placard where he found it; but Dennison, rapidly summing up every possibility of suspicion that could arise against him, had decided in an instant upon removing it. He possessed the true in-born genius of cunning; not mere skin-deep aptness

for cunning when occasion arises; and had the most thorough mistrust at all times as to the evidence of his own senses. He saw no one, certainly, as he came up the stairs, but how should he say that no one saw him? If any human eye had watched him in, and then saw the placard "not at home" still on his door, this circumstance alone might give birth to inquiry. In the hundreds of criminal cases that he had studied—not that he, Robert Dennison, was a criminal, this struck him only as a general fact—he had remarked how invariably men themselves help on the discovery of the real truth by the very means they employ to prevent suspicion. To have allowed the legal evidence of his marriage to remain in Cecil Street would have been the hardness of a fool. To act, now that he held them in possession, as near as possible with the quiet straightforwardness of an innocent man, was what his temperament and his reason alike bade him do.

The venetians of his windows were all pulled down tight; shutting out whatever air stirred on the river or in the Temple Gardens, but letting in that strange baked atmosphere, void of oxygen, and charged with all nameless evil compounds, peculiar probably to London more than any other city in the world during July and August. Dennison felt as though the closeness would stifle him; and crossing over to the window hastily pulled up one of the blinds above his head. The cords gave a creaking sound as he drew them; and a group of two or three little children, at play in the gardens beneath with their nurse, a tall dark girl, about the growth and age of Maggie, looked up at him, nurse and all, and laughed.

Bold as he was, and crafty, and alert against surprise, some weaker element there was, some lingering human association yet, in Robert Dennison's heart; and it stirred—ay, for an instant palsied every fibre of his stout frame at this moment.

Palsied by the sound of children's unconscious voices! by a girl's face that happened to have something the complexion or the smile of Maggie's! Why, what folly, what contemptible cowardice was this that was falling upon him?

He smiled to himself to think what tricks a man's nerves, the miserable material tramways of his intelligence! can in some disordered conditions of the system or the weather play upon him. But he let down the blind again with singular haste notwithstanding. The sun shone in that way, he remembered; the room after all must be cooler if he kept it darkened. . . .

. . . And then he carried the boxes into his bedroom, took the keys out from his pocket, and kneeling down upon the floor, set himself with a supreme effort of will, and with hands as trembling and as cold as hers had been when she left him last, to the accomplishment of his task.

CHAPTER V.

Dead Rose-Leaves!

SIX or eight French railway labels were on the boxes still; reminding Dennison, with the pathos these commonplace things can take at times, of every halting-place in his wedding tour. Calais, Amiens, Paris, Rouen, Dieppe—all the span of Maggie's short-lived dream of Elysian happiness! These, not without a sharp contraction of the heart, he tore off sufficiently to render them illegible, before attempting to open the boxes.

"If—if all this turns out nothing," he thought, as with trembling, awkward hands, he fitted one key after another into the lock of the portmanteau, and striving to address the other honourable, God-fearing Robert Dennison, not his very inmost self, as I suppose most of us do strive to the last, to blind something out of, and yet within, our own souls. "If Maggie is all right, and has only been getting up a little theatre to frighten me, I shan't have done much harm by destroying a love-letter or two, and a dozen photographs, and we shall laugh some day over the thought of my imaginary widowhood together—poor Maggie!"

But though he could address his honourable, God-fearing friend with such glib innocence, and although the portmanteau lay open now beneath his hand, Robert Dennison recoiled, as one would do at the

touch of death, from handling anything it contained. Afraid? Of course not. What was there for him to fear? He was out of sorts to-day—upset, naturally, at the bare possibility of this thing he dreaded; and, rising abruptly to his feet, he walked back to his sitting-room, and poured out and drank a glass of water from a carafe that stood upon the sideboard.

The heat was really stifling, and he had not been in bed since yesterday. What wonder if his throat felt fever-parched? What wonder if he shrank from making even the slightest bodily exertion? He took off his coat, and loosened his necktie—anything to keep his hands another minute from the contact of those things of hers!—Wondered if a cigar would do him good; lit one, put it to his lips, laid it down on the mantelpiece a minute after; took a turn or two up and down his room; then, with a convulsive sort of resolution, went back to his work, and, without giving himself another moment to think, drew out a whole armful of the contents of the portmanteau, and tossed them down beside him on the floor.

All the little possessions she had had in the world were there. Her linen, fine and white, but without lace or embroidery; her best black silk, carefully folded the wrong side out; her velvet jacket, pinned up (for next winter) in paper; her prayer-book; her work-case; a song or two, "Robert" among them, that Dennison had bought for her at the time when he thought drilling her unapt fingers into striking five or six notes of accompaniment the most blissful employment in existence; the play-bills of the French theatres, and of one or two London ones, to which he had taken her;

her marriage lines; a packet of his love-letters; her few trinkets; her watch and chain. All she had possessed; all the record of that short "lady's" life she had known since she exchanged Heathcotes and work, and peace of mind, for Mr. Dennison's love. The lodging-house servant had been faithful; everything was right; and Dennison held all the evidence most precious for him to possess, here, alone, between his own hands.

He collected every letter, every piece of paper containing a name, every photograph—there were about a dozen of himself, and one or two of her; then, having carefully looked over the linen, and found no letters or mark of any kind upon it, put back everything, with as neat a touch as he could command, into its place. It was horribly hard work. The air must be growing hotter and hotter, or his last night's vigil have made him really ill, for great cold drops—a strange effect for sultry weather to have—stood thick upon his forehead; the weight of these light woman's things—yes, even to the little linen cuffs and collars, the poor bit of embroidery, with the needle and thread still as she had left it—seemed to oppress his arms with an intolerable leaden weariness. But still, with unflagging strength of will, he kept himself to his work: never stopping until the last thing had been replaced, the newspaper folded, as her neat hands had folded it, over the top. The worst was over now, he thought. He had only to take a glance, for precaution, through the other box; only carefully to burn the photographs and letters one by one in his grate; and with somewhat restored nerve he was just preparing himself to look over the different papers that he held

in his hand, when a long loud ring came suddenly at his chambers' door.

For an instant his face turned to ashes; for an instant the common animal instincts of guilt—flight, concealment—did cross his brain. An instant only. Then Robert Dennison rallied thoroughly; the stout spirit, that had forsaken him when he was alone with a few senseless bits of cambric and silk, returning the moment that any positive danger—a man, a detective for aught he knew, was to be confronted. Anything, he reasoned promptly—the boxes, the torn labels still upon the floor, the letters in his possession—would be better than the risk of incurring suspicion by keeping his visitor waiting. And pushing the papers away, out of sight but not locked up—if search *were* made what mattered lock and key?—he took up his coat across his arm, passed his handkerchief over his face, then whistling out of tune—Robert Dennison never, under any circumstances, sang or whistled true—walked on calmly to the outer door and opened it.

No lynx-eyed detective officer stood there, but a young brother Templar, not exactly a friend of Dennison's, but a man whose money he was in the habit of taking at cards, and who consequently held himself entitled to come and bore him whenever and for whatever length of time he chose. His name matters not: he has no further connection with this history: enough that, although he was young, he was a bore of the first magnitude (and, on occasion, a young man may bore you quite as intensely as an old one); a bore who talked on and on of things without the remotest human interest, careless whether he received an answer or no; a bore who, when he had talked himself hoarse,

smoked, boring you still by the mere expression of his face, and when he had smoked himself dry, drank; and bored you more than ever by the interminable way in which he made his liquor hold out! Dennison went through torture inexpressible during the hour and a half that this man sat with him in his chambers. Negative torture, perhaps, but none the less poignant still. Here was invaluable time—time on the employment of which his whole future life might hang; and he had to sit quietly and listen to what Judge This said in such a Court, on such a case; and what Serjeant That, very mistakenly, replied; and what he, the bore, would have said had he been in either or both of their places! When seven o'clock came he felt that he could bear it no longer. After being tolerated for an hour and a half, could even a bore complain of being turned out, or draw suspicious conclusions from your wishing to be left alone? So, looking at his watch, he got up hurriedly; exclaimed, as though he had just remembered it, that he had an engagement for dinner, and managed to get his visitor to the threshold, where the unconscious bore stayed talking for ten minutes longer at least, one arm well within the door-way, as experience doubtless had taught him to do when talking to wearied and desperate men on the door-step of their own houses. And then Robert Dennison was alone again.

Seven o'clock. Three hours only since he first heard the newsboys calling along the Strand! He seemed to have lived a dozen common days in these three hours! Blankly staring at the trellis-work and shepherdesses on the coffee-room wall; walking alone with his guilty heart, in the sight of men and in the

sunshine, along the streets; waiting for the porter's return from Cecil Street; getting back to his chambers; the work that he had done there; the torture of sitting powerless with his visitor, listening for every sound upon the stairs, every heavy footstep that it seemed to him *must* stop, pause stealthily, and then be followed by a ring at his door.... Why, each of these seemed a distinct ghastly epoch; an epoch almost as remote from the present moment as were the happy innocent days when he was a boy at school. And six, seven hours remained still before the day would be done. God, were they to pass as these had passed? Was this how men live when they are in dread of discovery? Was there more meaning, after all, in that old-fashioned word "remorse" than any which he had before assigned to it in his philosophy?

He went back; he finished his task. Looked through the other box; handled more cambric and ribbons and bits of lace, round all of which the faint scent of the rose-leaves and lavender the country girl had brought with her from Heathcotes—well he remembered it—seemed clinging yet; burnt, one by one, his letters . . . how she had kept every line, every word that ever came from his hand! his photographs and hers; her marriage lines; the torn railway labels; everything. Then he stood free. The boxes he stowed out of sight, yet not with any ostentatious secrecy, in a closet among his own; the ashes from the papers he collected to the last fragment out of the grate, and shook away through the window. He stood free. The wife, whose existence had been his stumbling-block, gone; every paper that could prove him to have been her husband destroyed. Free! In a position at length to fulfil all his ambition,

ay, to marry his cousin Lucia, perhaps, if he chose. Free! And still with that livid sweat upon his forehead, that leaden weight about his limbs. Still listening for every footstep that approached his door; starting irritably at every child's voice that pealed up, sweet and merry, from the Temple Gardens without!

He would be better abroad, he thought, when another miserable half hour had passed by: better with men's eyes upon him; better anywhere than here. It was being shut up in the same room with these things of his poor Maggie's that overcame him; and no wonder! addressing the other honest, virtuous Robert Dennison again. She was a good girl, one who loved him well! It might be to his worldly advantage that she should be gone; but he would never find a woman love him as she had done—never! and it was horrible to have to bear up and keep an iron face when in his heart he was yearning for freedom to weep over her; yearning to find her out, rescue her from sacrilegious touch or sight, and bestow the last poor amends he could make for all the bitter wrongs he had done her!

Robert Dennison said this: probably he thought it in his very heart. The hardest, the guiltiest man among us all, never, I imagine, stands utterly bare, face to face with his own conscience. And when, an hour later, he found himself sitting in his accustomed dining-place, but physically unable to swallow food, and with a choking sensation at his throat whenever he thought of those poor things of hers that he had touched (the things whose faint rose-leaf scent *would* cling about him still), he felt satisfied, not alone that he was in no way guilty of her death—that, of course, was self-evident—but that he must really have been

a great deal fonder of her than he knew, and that her loss, if indeed he had lost her, would be a life-long burthen for him to bear.

After his scarce-tasted dinner came dessert, and with dessert the third edition of one of the evening papers was laid before him.

"The police continue actively engaged upon the mysterious case of drowning from London Bridge." In an instant his eyes lighted on this paragraph: and still—as on the placard in the Strand—the prophecy of his own shame seemed to stand out, luridly distinct as if printed in red ink; from all the other news. "It is believed now that death took place before the body reached the water, and grave suspicions of foul play are entertained. An inquest will be held to-morrow morning, when it is fully expected that further and most important circumstances will be brought to light; indeed, we believe we shall not hinder the ends of justice by hinting that a clue to the solution of the tragedy has been already traced. Two facts at least may be stated as certain: first, that a handkerchief, evidently the property of a gentleman, and finely embroidered with three initial letters, was found in the breast of the unfortunate deceased; secondly, that the person of a man with whom she was seen in conversation on the night of her death is known to an officer of the City Police."

And there were five hours more before Robert Dennison could even hope to find forgetfulness in sleep!

CHAPTER VI.

By the River-Side.

THREE O'CLOCK in the afternoon again; the sky a livid copper-colour; the pavements broiling hot; the air quivering, dense, and furnace-like. London at white heat. London at that soft hour of an August day when, far away in the country, lengthening shades begin to cross the yellow fields, and when the robin, reminding one already of autumn evenings, pipes from the hedgerows, and voices of men and girls at harvest-work ring pleasantly through the leafy lanes.

"Mr. Wickham, Lilac Court," exclaimed a sunburnt countrywoman, as she descended from an omnibus in Fleet Street, about fifty yards east of Chancery Lane, and gazing about her with the stunned, bewildered air that men and women more accustomed to a bovine than a human world are apt to wear when they find themselves upon a city pavement. "And however in the world am I to find where Lilac Court is?"

The question, vaguely addressed to the general intelligence of London, having received no answer, she went into a law stationer's close at hand and repeated it. Would any of the gentlemen, with a curtesy, have the goodness to direct her to Lilac Court? Which the omnibus set her down here as her nearest point, but being a stranger in London on important business, and in search of a gentleman by the name of Wickham—

"First turn to the right, six doors up, second

floor," cried an automaton-like little old man, without raising his eyes from an enormous ledger, on which he was occupied. "Bell on the left as you enter. Now then, Charlie, you look alive!" still without raising his eyes, and addressing a furiously hot boy who, with arms full of blue ruled paper, was issuing, in his shirt sleeves, through a hole in the floor; "and as you go up to Atkins's show this party the way to Mr. Wickham's office."

An order which the boy at once obeyed; turning round with a noiseless whistle and staring full in the face of the countrywoman, who followed him, in a way that discountenanced her extremely. Mr. Wickham, whoever he might be, seemed tolerably well known, she thought; and in London, too, where she had always heard no man knew the name of his next-door neighbour; but that was no reason why those that wanted Mr. Wickham should be stared at like beasts in a caravan. London manners, as far as she could see, were pretty much a piece with their milk; and instead of giving the boy twopence for his pains, as her heart prompted her, the good woman strode indignantly past him up the stairs conducting to Mr. Wickham's office, never pausing, although her face grew ominously redder, her breath shorter, at every step, until she found herself upon the second floor, to which she had been directed to go.

A brass plate, bearing the name of "Mr. Wickham," was on a door straight before her, a little white-handled bell on the left—a bell which when pulled gave, not a hearty human peal, as country bells do, but one muffled stroke, like the ghost of the squire's stable

gong, she thought; or the first cracked "dong" of the old village church-bell sounding for a funeral.

In a second, and without any mortal agency that the countrywoman could discern, the door opened, and she found herself, too agitated to speak, inside a small, very neat office, and in the presence of a middle-aged gentleman, dressed in a plain suit of dark clothes: a gentleman who was sitting, a letter in his hand, beside the open window which admitted whatever air there was to be had from Lilac Court. He looked round; took one glance at his visitor's appearance and demeanour—the country face, the country clothes, the little country curtsy—then gave her a good-humoured nod and a smile that set her at her ease in a moment.

"Good afternoon to you, ma'am. Tolerably hot here in London, isn't it?" And without waiting for her to answer, the gentleman in plain clothes came across the room, gave her a chair, and taking one himself, sat down, as though they had known each other since childhood, and had met for the express purpose of talking over the familiar events of by-gone years together. "You've had a good deal of trouble to find my place out, no doubt?" he went on, seeing that she wanted breath still. "Country folk *have* a trouble in finding their way about at first, until they get a little used like to the town."

The visitor upon this took out her handkerchief; first wiped her forehead, then her eyes, and observed, in a fluttered way, that town for certain was one thing and the country another, and there was a deal of wickedness about everywhere—an apothegm at which her companion shook his head corroboratively—and she was staying with her cousin at Stoke Newington,

and if she might be so bold—cutting short her private history with a nervous jerk—was she speaking to Mr. Wickham?

“Well, yes—my name certainly is Wickham,” answered the gentleman in plain clothes; but with a sort of reluctance, as though good-breeding struggled with truth in thus speaking of himself at all. “And yours, ma’am, I think—”

She replied, all in strong, midland-county accent, and with utter absence of stops, and ever-growing agitation, that her name was Sherborne. Susan Sherborne, wife of Thomas Sherborne, of the parish of Heathcotes, Staffordshire; and holding a dairy-farm, as his father had done before him, of Sir John Durant, of Durant’s Court. Mr. Wickham had heard of the family at the Court, of course? Mr. Wickham’s face interpolates that he is familiar with them—and seven months ago come the 10th, a trouble fell on her, and on the family too, for the matter of that, and she had never been herself since. Not to say ill, but a kind of weakness all over and no sleep o’ nights—a shake of Mr. Wickham’s head shows that this kind of nervous affection is well known to him personally—and so for change of air, though air it isn’t (in parenthesis), from air to no air would be nearer the mark—she came up to spend a few days with her cousin, married to a greengrocer at Stoke Newington, and the mother of five as beautiful children as you’d see anywhere. Here she stopped, and put her handkerchief to her eyes again.

“Well, ma’am, nothing happened to any of ’em, I hope?” said Mr. Wickham, taking out his watch and looking hard at her. “My time is rather short to-day, and although I’m particularly fond of children——”

"Oh, sir!" cried the woman eagerly, "it isn't the children at all, and I won't keep you five minutes. It was all in the papers yesterday, about the girl that was found drowned, you know, and my cousin's husband, which a better man and a kinder, out of drink, doesn't live, read it out to us after supper, and if you'll believe me, sir, I never timed my eyes all night, thinking from the description it might be our Maggie; and this morning my cousin said to me, 'Susan,' she said, 'you take a 'bus and go off and try whether you can get to see her for yourself or not, for 'anything,' she said, 'is better than thinking one thing and thinking another and fretting yourself which is here for health, off your rest and victuals.' And so, sir, by her and her husband's advice, I came, as you see."

"And to me!" exclaimed Mr. Wickham, with innocent perturbation. "Why, my dear soul, whatever on the face of the earth made you come to me?"

"Oh, sir! I hope you'll excuse the liberty if I've done wrong, but I went to a police station, somewhere about Dewry Lane, I believe, was the name——"

"Well, there is a police station—there *is* a police station near Dewry Lane, certainly," Mr. Wickham admitted; adhering to his visitor's pronunciation with the fine breeding that seemed an instinct in him.

"And the people there were very civil, and I went in and spoke to him as seemed the chief, and told him what I came about and what I wanted, and says he, 'Mr. Wickham is the person for you to see in this: Mr. Wickham, Lilac Court,' which I knew no more than the babe unborn, and wrote it on an envelope, as I can show you."

And she took out an envelope, on which was written

"Mr. Wickham, Lilac Court, Fleet Street," with a hieroglyphic of some kind or other—a monogram, probably, of the Drury Lane establishment—scrawled in the corner.

Mr. Wickham took the envelope; looked at it carefully; folded it down with his broad thumb-nail; tore it up with an absent air into small pieces; and finally took out and consulted his watch again. "Half-past three! Well, well, my dear, we must see what can be done for you, and we'll hope—for your sake and the young woman's sake equal—that everything will turn out comfortable. Turn out comfortable," he repeated, rubbing his hands slowly together, "as most things do, you know, when taken in time. Staffordshire's a fine county to live in, isn't it? Clayey? Ah, so I've been told, but fine pasture in your neighbourhood. Yes, yes; *just* so. And you've held your land under Sir John Durant all your life, as you may say. And your husband's father before him. To be sure. Well, now then I'll tell you what I can do for you in this affair. You know who I am, of course? Mr. Wickham—yes, that's my name for certain; but I mean, you know who I am, and what my profession is?"

Mrs. Sherborne suggested, vaguely, "In the law, she supposed?" Her ideas of the constabulary were exclusively confined to blue coats, white gloves, and helmets; and she would have been less surprised at hearing that her new friend was Lord Chancellor than a policeman.

"In the law! ha, ha!" Mr. Wickham laughed pleasantly. "Well, that's not so bad. In the law! and so I am in the law, and I'm going to help you with a little of my legal advice. You've taken a fancy

that this young woman who was found in the river is some friend of yours; and although it's rather late in the day—such matters being generally got over quick,” adds Mr. Wickham, with ghastly meaning, “in this murky sort of thundery weather—I'll do what I can for you to have a look at the poor creature. Only, first—first, you see, ma'am, for form's sake, I must ask you this: Why do you suppose the young woman found drowned in the river and your friend are one and the same?”

Mrs. Sherborne hesitated, and glanced nervously about the room, with a haunting recollection still, probably, of the supernatural way in which the door had opened to her. “I don't want to get any one into trouble, sir”—bringing out her handkerchief again—“and unless I was certain—”

“Just so,” interrupted Mr. Wickham, reassuringly. “That's it. Unless you were certain, you wouldn't wish to mention names, or do anything to bring other people into trouble. That's quite right, Mrs. Sherborne, and I respect you for the sentiment; only, you see, *why* should you imagine that your friend and the young woman found in the river should be one and the same? That's the question we've got to do with now.”

“Well, sir, then, as I must speak, it was the description of the person that struck me; and a finer-grown girl, and a handsomer, than Maggie, there was not in the country round, nor a better; and being an orphan, and had lived under my roof since she were twelve, I know just as well as if she were my own—and when first she went away, seven months ago come the 10th, I never would believe, for all one might say and another might say, that she had come to harm,

nor never would. Only, you see, sir, and you'll excuse me for saying it, that where there's a gentleman born in a case like this, there's no saying what a girl may be drove to as soon as that gentleman born gets tired of her—married or not married." And Mrs. Sherborne sobbed aloud.

Mr. Wickham got up, took his hat and stick, and called, without raising his voice, "Nicholson." Whereupon a younger man, dressed also in plain clothes, appeared through a panelled door, which Mrs. Sherborne had not noticed, close to the chief's right hand. "I'm going a little way in the City with this good lady, Nicholson. Nothing particular," giving a single look into the other's face, "and nothing that will keep me long. If I am not back at five, and Barton calls, tell him I believe I've news of the vessel he was wanting to hear about. Now, ma'am, I am at your service." And with many gallant apologies for going first, Mr. Wickham preceded Mrs. Sherborne down the dark and narrow staircase; then out through Lilac Court, and into Fleet Street again.

"No objection to a two-wheel, ma'am?" he asked, putting his nose close Mrs. Sherborne's ear, in order to make himself heard amidst the thunders of the Fleet. "I thought not," as Mrs. Sherborne, in helpless pantomime, expressed that two-wheels and four-wheels were the same to her. "The ladies all patronise the two-wheels now-a-day;" and, waiting a minute or two first, to select an extra good horse, Mr. Wickham hailed a hansom; then after handing Mrs. Sherborne into it—a work of some trouble, for she had never been in such a conveyance before, and required minute instructions as to which side she should sit, and what she should

do with her basket and her umbrella, an excessively bulky one, apparently holding other articles inside—told the cabman to drive to some address the country-woman could not hear, and jumping in alertly, took his place beside her.

They had a long distance to go; but Mr. Wickham made the road seem short by the pleasant way in which he lionized the City to his companion. Up that street, to the left, was the Old Bailey, of which, of course, she had heard tell; and here was Ludgate Hill and Saint Paul's Cathedral; and the Monument, from which, in years gone by, the people used to pitch themselves. And there, away to the right, was London Bridge, and this—when they had passed into the region of narrow lanes, and water-side avenues which lie beside Lower Thames Street and the river—this was the way down to the Tower, where the kings and queens used to be beheaded, and the docks, the pride and glory of Great Britain, before all the nations of the earth.

Not a very pleasant part of the town, Mr. Wickham acknowledges—and as he looks into the wholesome rosy face at his side, the contrast between it and the soddened, yellow, miserable faces on the pavement strikes even him—but worth seeing too, in its way. Folks from the country ought to be able to tell their friends they had seen everything, the good and the bad together,—“and you must keep your spirits up, my dear,” he adds, “and look about you, and hope that everything will turn out comfortable yet.”

They drove along through more labyrinths of lanes and avenues; each so dark on this bright summer day, so fetid, so sunless, that even with the pleasant gen-

tleman who was protecting her by her side, Mrs. Sherborne's spirits sank within her at every minute. "Keep a good heart, ma'am," whispered Mr. Wickham, "keep a good heart. We're at our journey's end now, and you shall have your mind set at rest and everything put straight in less than a quarter of an hour." And then, opening the lid in the roof, he bade the driver stop at the first turn to the left, when they got to the river-side.

"You'll have to walk a few steps, Mrs. Sherborne," he said, turning cheerily, as soon as they had alighted, to the poor scared woman, from whose honest face every vestige of its natural colour had now flown.

"Just take my arm, and we'll soon know the worst of everything." Saying which, Mr. Wickham turned down a narrow passage or footroad, between two ruinous blocks of houses, and after walking twenty or thirty steps, stopped before the door of a small tavern, squalid and black with dirt, like everything else in the neighbourhood, and with a female, apparently a Red Indian, grasping a toasting fork, as she sat upon a particoloured ball, an eel writhing under her feet, and "Britannia" written in yellow and green letters above, for a sign-board.

"Is—is she here, sir?" cried Mrs. Sherborne, drawing back on the threshold of the house. "For the Lord's sake, tell me!"

"You come along with me," was Mr. Wickham's answer, in a somewhat more authoritative tone than the mild and easy one he had hitherto employed. "You come along with me, ma'am, and keep yourself cool *and* quiet. We may be very interested, as is natural, in our own little business, you know, but that's no

reason why we should set other people up to be interested in it too."

He led her through the passage, or rather through the series of crooked passages—down one step, up two, down three again—that intersected the house; speaking a word or two to some person or persons behind the red curtain of the bar as he passed; then out into a small strip of land, that might in those regions be called a garden, at the back—a garden thickly covered with a deposit of oyster, crab, and lobster-shells, but without a trace of flower, tree, or plant of any kind. At the bottom of this garden, and on a dead level with it, lay the Thames; golden now in the slanting summer sun, and with its stately outward-bound ships floating slowly down to the sea. On one side was a nest of dark, broken-down, one-storied houses; on the other a plain stone building, soot-grimed like everything else in the district, but comparatively decent; whole-paned at least, and with a look "less like being murdered and quick-limed than any of the other places about," as Mrs. Sherborne used afterwards to say, when narrating all this terrible day's experience to her gossips by the comfortable hearth at home.

To a side-door of this building Mr. Wickham, passing out through a shattered gate in the ale-house garden, now conducted his companion. His knock was answered in a moment by a policeman in uniform—for the first time giving Mrs. Sherborne the comforting assurance that she was really under the protection of the law.

"Mrs. Matthews here?" inquired Mr. Wickham, curtly.

"Yes, sir," was the answer, given in the same tone, and with no look of recognition passing between the officer and the visitor.

"Send her to me."

They waited a minute or so; Mrs. Sherborne beyond the power of asking questions now, but holding on trembling—stout-nerved countrywoman as she was—to Mr. Wickham's arm; then Mrs. Matthews appeared—a short, stout, hard-featured old woman with a smile destined to haunt Mrs. Sherborne's rest while she lived: such a smile as you might imagine a woman would wear who united in herself the offices of searcher and layer-out at a river-side police station; and Mr. Wickham, after a whispered word or two in her ear, handed his companion over to her charge.

"You're only just in time," she croaked, after conducting Mrs. Sherborne along a dark stone-vaulted passage, and stopping as she selected a key from a bunch at her waist. "In half an hour more she'd 'a been screwed down. Walk in, my dear, don't be afeard! and if I was you—not being accustomed—I'd hold my handkerchief up over my mouth. La, la!" as Mrs. Sherborne stood faintly irresolute before obeying her, "it's what we must all come to—all come to!"

And then Mrs. Matthews stood placidly thinking of her tea, and consoling herself for being interrupted in it by some periwinkles which she happened to have in her pocket, while the countrywoman went in alone to look upon the face of the dead.

CHAPTER VII.

"G. S. D."

MR. WICKHAM had followed the two women closely, and stood ready to meet Mrs. Sherborne when, at the end of a silent two minutes, she tottered back out of the room to which they had conducted her.

A glance, less than a glance, into her face told him all that he sought to know; and in a moment he was at her side, and had drawn her hand fast within his arm again. "You keep yourself quiet, Mrs. Sherborne," he whispered, leading her out of ear-shot of the old woman at once. "Don't you say a word—not one! and never fear but that justice will be done to all. I told you things would end comfortable, and so they will. Take my word for it."

And then back the way they had come, too quick to give Mrs. Sherborne time to cry or break down, he led her through the oyster-shell beds, and along the narrow up-and-down passages of the public house till they reached the bar. Here Mr. Wickham stopped, and addressed a word or two to a man dressed in a jersey and a fur cap, and of a countenance that bespoke a closer acquaintance with the practices of the ring than with any Christian virtues—the landlord, half waterman, half prize-fighter, wholly blackguard, of the "Britannia."

"Surely, Mr. Wickham, surely," he answered, obsequiously. "Sarah Ann," opening a door at the back,

or river-side of the house, "come out a little to me, my dear. Here's a gentleman and a lady would like the parlour to have a cup of tea in. This way, ma'am," to Mrs. Sherborne; "one step down, if you please. Sarah Ann, wheel the sofy round to the window. As fine a view of the river, though I say it, ma'am, as any in London."

Sarah Ann was a dark-haired, rather pretty child of fourteen, with the unmistakeable look of decent girlhood about her clean summer dress and shining hair and modest face: the look that so mysteriously meets you sometimes, in these places, and on the children of ruffians like this man. She put down her work—very smart wool-work it was, Mrs. Sherborne noted, as women do note the small matters of their world, whatever their own state of mind—with silver paper carefully pinned over it to keep all, save the square inch where she was working, clean; then followed her father out of the room at once, smiling shyly at Mr. Wickham, who remarked that she really grew out of knowledge every time she came home from boarding-school, and Mrs. Sherborne and her new friend were left alone.

Mr. Wickham came across the room, put a chair for himself opposite the rickety horse-hair sofa that the girl had wheeled beside the bay-window, and looked Mrs. Sherborne steadily in the face.

"Now, my good lady," said he, "don't you go to flurry yourself unnecessarily. I needn't put any questions, for I see by your face that your friend and this young woman that was found in the river are one and the same, and, as I told you before, you needn't fear but that justice will be done to all. You know, I sup-

pose, Mrs. Sherborne, that the inquest on the body was held this morning?"

No, she sobbed, she knew nothing. Only she was sure—and she told Eliza, her cousin at Stoke Newington, the same—that she should be too late, however it was.

"And were not too late," put in Mr. Wickham, quietly. "So far from being too late, were just in time, it appears, to establish your friend's identity. Now, Mrs. Sherborne, may I further ask if you know what conclusion was arrived at by the jury? You don't, I see; and I'll tell you. No conclusion at all. There was evidence to prove that a heavy body was heard to fall into the water close to the bridge about ten o'clock the night before last, and that this woman was discovered dead—drifted in among some vessels not a couple of hundred yards from where we are sitting"—Mrs. Sherborne shuddered—"by an early hour next morning. And there was medical evidence from two surgeons, holding different opinions as to the direct cause of death (as surgeons mostly do on inquests), and that was all. No identification of the body; no clue to the young woman's history in any way. So the jury, directed by the coroner, brought in a verdict 'that deceased was found dead in the waters of the river Thames, but how she came into the said waters there was no evidence to show.' The further management of the case was put—now don't you be surprised—into my hands. I am Inspector Wickham of the detective force, and the people in the office near Drury Lane knew what they were about when they advised you to come to me for assistance."

Mrs. Sherborne started up to her feet; her horror

at the sickening sight she had been newly forced to look upon; her grief—and very real grief it was—at the confirmation of her fears—every conflicting emotion of her heart swallowed up in the one overwhelming terror of being in the presence of a detective! This mild, middle-aged gentleman to whom she had talked so freely, and who had lionised the City, and given her his arm so pleasantly, a detective! One of that dread force who with a lightning glance, a seemingly-careless question, can worm out all secrets from the human breast, and deliver men up, whether dukes or beggars, to the dread retribution of justice. A detective! and to realise what Mrs. Sherborne felt, it must be recollected that her belief in the infallible, almost omniscient, sharpness of the corps was the purely popular one, derived principally from weekly serials, and holding as much resemblance to the real detective officer of every-day life as the popular Jesuit, the malignant fanatical fiend of Protestant stories, does to the pleasant *poco curante* gentlemen of the society of Jesus, who sit beside you at a dinner-party.

“If I had only known, sir!” she gasped; “if I had only known,” dropping him a curtsey, “I would have spoken very different.”

“Not a doubt of it,” interrupted Mr. Wickham, laying his hand good-humouredly on her arm, and making her sit down again. “If you had known who I was, and what I was about, you’d have been so flustered—I’ve seen it scores of times among your sex, ma’am—as scarcely to know whether the deceased was your friend or was not. And for that very reason, you see, I kept dark until you had identified her, and took you quiet and comfortable by a side-door

to the station, so that you should not be upset by the crowd outside (which there mostly is in these parts) nor anything. And now, Mrs. Sherborne, you take a cup of tea"—this as the tawdry slip-shod barmaid of the Britannia opened the door and came in with a tea-tray; "you take a cup of tea, and give me one, and then we'll start off homewards. Push the table over by the window, Polly, and let's see what we've got here. Buttered toast, creases, ham, and a plate of s'rimps." Mr. Wickham's tastes were evidently understood in the Britannia. "That will do first-rate, and if we want more hot water we'll ring. Now, Mrs. Sherborne, will you pour out the tea? Well, the sofa *is* low; suppose you have a chair over here? I can't say I ever fancy a cup of tea unless it has been poured out by a lady's hand!" adds Mr. Wickham, persuasively.

Upon which, Mrs. Sherborne having, with some difficulty, taken off her silk gloves, or rather peeled them back after the manner of a snake shedding its skin, untied her bonnet-strings, and spread out her pocket-handkerchief over the lap of her black silk dress, these two singularly-matched companions began their meal together.

Lengthened study of our common nature had taught Mr. Wickham, among other important psychological truths, that the conscience of any fasting human creature is much austerer, much more difficult to draw on into confidence, than that of a feasting one. It had also taught him practical wisdom concerning the exact description of food or drink with which the conscience of persons of different ages and sexes may be best propitiated. Thus, with a broken-down swell, he would

infallibly, at five o'clock of an afternoon, order sherry and bitters; with the young of either sex, tarts and ginger-beer; with a ragged outcast of the streets, a "quartern"; with a woman of Mrs. Sherborne's age and habits, tea, buttered toast, and a relish. And a striking trait of character, a beautiful instance of professional zeal, was to be found in the fact that, whatever conscience had to be thus propitiated, high or low, male or female, Mr. Wickham's own digestive powers were ever equal to the task of bearing that conscience company during the process of propitiation.

"Another cup of tea, ma'am? Well, I don't know but what I will take another, if you'll keep me in countenance—and a bit more ham? Come now, you must." The poor woman, who had been traversing London since morning, was really taking her food with relish, but felt, as many people do, that it was a sort of crime, requiring apology, to eat under affliction. "You must keep your strength up, you know. Now, just a little bit—as thin as a wafer. That's it. And so," after a silence, "this Miss Hall, poor thing, had more than one admirer, eh? Ah! it's generally the case with pretty young women—as I am sure you must have known, ma'am. And mostly above her in rank. All of them, indeed, I think you mentioned?"

"Well, Mr. Wickham," answered Mrs. Sherborne, confidentially; for, alas for human nature! two plates of ham, two cups of tea, and a few of the detective's artful questions had made her heart so warm towards him, that the names of Gerald Durant and Miss Lucia and Mr. Dennison were already as household words to Mr. Wickham. "I don't say all were above her, for there was young Frank Simmons of the mill, as good

a lad as ever walked, has been ready to marry her any time this two years; but bless you, these young girls 'll never look at an honest lad of their own condition when once a gentleman have turned their heads with soft words and flatteries! And for certain Mr. Gerald is a gentleman that any woman, high or low, might be proud to be chosen by—or Mr. Dennison either—and as fine a made man and perfect a gentleman in his ways, as I ever see!"

"And the general opinion, at first, of the country round was that Mr. Gerald Durant—thank you, Mrs. Sherborne, I don't know but what I will take a crease or two—that Mr. Gerald Durant—Gerald Sidney, I think you said?"—and, mentally, Mr. Wickham twists the letters G. S. D. into a monogram like one he holds in his possession—"was the companion of the girl's flight?"

"Well, it certainly was said by some," answered Mrs. Sherborne, shaking her head with melancholy emphasis; "but for my part I never see why there should be more suspicion of Mr. Gerald than of another. Old Sir John took up cruelly hard against him for certain, and for the last six months Mr. Gerald has not been near the Court."

"And you yourself believe the girl to have been really married, Mrs. Sherborne, you say?"

"I do, Mr. Wickham," she answered, decisively. "I got a letter from her, as I told you, a few days after she left, and in that letter she spoke of herself and her happiness in a way that I would take my oath she wasn't a girl to do unless she had been a lawful wedded wife. Why, wasn't she found with a marriage ring tied on the ribbon round her neck, sir?" cried

Mrs. Sherborne, eagerly, and with a trembling voice again.

"Y—es," answered Mr. Wickham, with deliberation, "that she certainly was, and that taken by itself says nothing—less than nothing, ma'am. If you'd seen as much of this kind of thing as I have, you'd know that people who are going to make away with themselves will act a lie—pay money sometimes to carry that lie out—as deliberate—as deliberate," repeated Mr. Wickham, pausing for a simile, "as you or I might do that mean to live. She may have been married and she may not, and this Mr. Durant may or may not have been her lover. Time alone will bring it all to light, *and* silence. You understand my meaning, I hope, Mrs. Sherborne, when I say, *and* silence?"

Mrs. Sherborne opened her eyes very wide, but made no answer.

"I don't mean, of course," explained Mr. Wickham, "that you are not to tell your friends at home of the girl's death, and of your having identified her. You say you're going back to Staffordshire to-morrow morning, and it's only natural, and indeed right, that you should speak when you get there of what you have seen. My meaning is, that you should in no way seek to throw blame on this young gentleman, Mr. Durant, or even mention anything about the conversation that you have had with me. As far as I can make out, Mr. Durant has suffered a great deal in his reputation, as respects a certain party, already, and if, now that that party has met with a sudden death, one was to begin saying one thing and one another, the young gentleman might be brought into very bad trouble in-

deed. You take my meaning right, Mrs. Sherborne? I'm an officer of justice, and the business of my life is to bring the guilty *to* justice, but my maxim always is—shield the innocent, and believe every man innocent until he is proved to be guilty!"

At the enunciation of these beautiful sentiments from the lips of a detective, Mrs. Sherborne's honest eyes filled with tears. Mr. Wickham need have no fear of her, she sobbed. The family at the Court were the best friends she and her husband had got in the world. She had known Mr. Gerald since he was a baby, and had always loved him for his fair face and his winning ways—that she had! and Miss Lucia too; and in spite of all that was past and gone, the best day in her life would be when she should hear the church-bells ringing for their wedding. Hadn't she mentioned that they were lovers?—in answer to the keen flash of intelligence that passed across Wickham's face—why, it had been a settled thing when Mr. Gerald was still in frocks. No one need fear that her tongue would do an injury to him, or any of the family, bless them! and she only hoped Mr. Wickham would kindly take no advantage of anything she might have let fall already—making him her country curtsy, and looking imploringly and with tearful eyes in his face.

"Take advantage!" he repeated, almost indignantly. "Why, of course not. I only want to see justice done, to you and your friends too, and don't you fear but if I can bring anything to light in this affair you shall hear from me again. Mrs. Sherborne, Heathcotes, Staffordshire, I think you said?" taking out a small

pocket-book and a pencil from his pocket. "Near Hatton—ah, yes, near Hatton, Staffordshire. And Heathcotes is on Sir John Durant's estate?—to be sure. Now, Mrs. Sherborne, do you happen to know Mr. Gerald Durant's address? Somewhere West-end way, you believe, and in the Guards. Well, well, that'll do, I don't suppose I am at all likely to want it. And the other cousin—the gentleman who was also an admirer of Miss Hall's—Mr. Robert Dennison, barrister, lives in a place called the Temple, if you remember right? Just so. Now, ma'am, if you have quite done, perhaps you will get ready to start"—Mr. Wickham, whose *petits soins* for the fair sex seemed unbounded, pointed out a small dingy looking-glass covered round with pink and green crimped paper above the mantelpiece—"and I'll see you part of the way on your journey home. If we look sharp we can walk up to Eastcheap just in time to catch a six o'clock 'bus direct for Stoke Newington."

Which they did. Mr. Wickham saw Mrs. Sherborne, umbrella and all, safely embedded away among fourteen other Stoke Newington passengers; shook hands with her heartily; hoped they would soon meet again; desired his compliments to Mr. S. at home; and kissed the tips of his fingers with gallantry as he stood carelessly watching the departure of the omnibus from the Eastcheap office. Then in a second his attitude, his manner, the whole expression of his face, seemed to change.

"Five minutes past six," he thought, taking out his watch. "Time still to look up one or both of these men to-day. The lawyer is the least important; but he

comes first upon the road; 'G. S. D.' can be seen to afterwards."

And he hailed a cab, jumped into it, and told the man to drive, and lose no time upon the way, to the Temple.

CHAPTER VIII.

Working up a Case.

ANOTHER long day was wearing towards its close with Robert Dennison. The evening papers had afforded him the scanty information that the verdict returned had, by the coroner's direction, been an open one. No details of the inquest itself had as yet been published, and in a fever of doubt and suspense he was standing by his open window, gazing vacantly out upon the gardens and the river, and speculating as to what kind of evidence might at this moment be in the hands of the police, when a discreet ring—neither the loud ring of a friend nor the deprecating ring of a modest dun—came at his chambers' door. A minute later, the card of Inspector Wickham, of the Metropolitan Police—for this time it was the policy of Mr. Wickham to affect no mystery—was handed to him.

I have already said that once in the broad region of absolute falsehood, and Mr. Dennison felt himself more at home than in the delicate border-land which separates falsehood from truth. It was the same with danger. Once face to face with positive peril, in a position where his own strong will and keen brain were all he had to look to for help, and his nerves felt calmer, his heart freer, his face wore more its natural colour and expression, than it had worn yet during the blank dread of the last twenty-four hours. With

steady self-possession, overdone in no way, he turned round as Inspector Wickham—closely following his card—was announced; gave him the kind of nod a man would naturally give to a gentleman of Mr. Wickham's appearance and profession; then stood, his eyes quietly fixed upon his visitor's face, as though waiting to hear what he had got to say.

Mr. Wickham gave a little cough, and looked down for a second at the pattern of the carpet. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Dennison, for calling upon you so late in the afternoon, but the fact is I have some rather important business on hand; and if you are disengaged—"

Robert Dennison glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece, and answered that he did not dine till seven—it was five-and-twenty minutes past six now—and that he should be happy to give his attention to what Mr. Wickham had to say. Then he seated himself beside the table in the centre of the room, signing to his visitor to take a chair opposite him, and laid his arm upon it in a sort of professional attitude of attention. What could Inspector Wickham of the police have to say to Mr. Dennison, barrister-at-law, that was not of a purely abstract or professional character?

"I shall not trouble you long," remarked Wickham, upon whom none of these indications of calmness were lost; "and what I have got to say I shall say in as plain a manner as possible. I am an officer of the detective police, Mr. Dennison, as you are aware. I am employed in the case of the woman who lost her life from London Bridge two days ago, and I have come in search of some important information which I believe it may be in your power to render me concerning her."

Still not a quiver of the lip; not a change of hue; not a second's abatement of the black eyes that were fixed on Wickham's face. "I shall be happy to hear what you have to say, Mr. Wickham; but I need hardly tell you that this is a case wholly different to any with which I am ever concerned."

"You mean in a professional way, Mr. Dennison?"

Dennison nodded.

"I am not addressing you in your professional capacity, sir. The details I am seeking for, the inquiries I am about to make, are strictly private ones. Can you enlighten me in any way as to what Margaret Hall's movements have been since she left Heathcotes on the 10th of January last, or who Margaret Hall's companion was on the night of the 2nd instant—the night of her death?"

"Margaret Hall!" cried Dennison, starting up eagerly, and with a flush dyeing his dark face. "You don't mean to tell me——" His agitation made the words die upon his lips.

"I mean to say that the body of the girl who met her death from London Bridge two nights ago has been identified, since the inquest, as that of Margaret Hall, late of Heathcotes, Staffordshire," answered Wickham, coldly. "I am in a delicate position, Mr. Dennison, and you are in a delicate position; but it may save a great deal of trouble and vexation to all parties hereafter if you answer me one or two plain questions now—although, of course, no one knows better than you do, sir, that it rests entirely with yourself to do so or not."

Robert Dennison sank down into his chair, and

passed his hand hastily across his eyes. "I am ready to answer any question you choose," he said, in an altered voice, after a minute's dead silence; "but there are circumstances connected with the name of Margaret Hall which make this news a terrible blow to me—a terrible blow," he repeated; and drawing across a decanter of wine that stood upon the table, he poured some out into a tumbler, and swallowed it at a single gulp. "Who identified her?" he cried, as Wickham, silent and impassive, sat and watched his face. "Good God!—there may be some mistake still! Margaret Hall was a simple country girl—a girl whom I, whom all of our family, knew and respected. Who identified her? Who knows that she was ever in London? All this must be seen into at once."

"The person who identified her was a farmer's wife of the name of Sherborne," answered Wickham, quietly. "You know her? I thought so. The girl's late mistress at Heathcotes. She is staying up here in London, it seems; and when she read the description of deceased in the paper, thought, not unnaturally perhaps, Mr. Dennison, under the circumstances, that it might be the girl who left her service seven months ago, as it has proved to be. As to the matter being seen into," added Mr. Wickham, with an expression that on another face might have been a half smile, "you may rest quite easy about that. There is no doubt whatever about the identification; and what I hope and expect to make equally clear is this: What company was Margaret Hall in on the night of August the 2nd, the last night of her life? Now, Mr. Dennison, remembering always that it rests entirely with yourself to answer or not, may I ask if there is any information

you can afford me on the subject? August the 2nd—two nights ago?”

“And I answer that I have not the faintest clue to what you seek,” answered Dennison, with deliberation. “August the 2nd—Tuesday—I was dining at home on that night, I remember, with a party of friends. Whatever question you have to ask, Mr. Wickham, you must have the kindness to put into plainer language. We shall never come to understand each other by enigmas.”

“Certainly not. Now, do you object in any way, Mr. Dennison—as you have a perfect right to do—to tell me the names of the gentlemen who formed your party?”

“Not the very slightest; although I am wholly at a loss to understand the drift of your inquiries. There were,” after a moment’s thought, “Mr. Drury, Mr. Charteris, Mr. McIvor, and Mr. Broughton.”

“No one else?”

“No one. Stay: quite late in the evening, my cousin, Mr. Gerald Durant, came in for a short time.”

“Late in the evening. I suppose by that, sir, you mean a little late for dinner?”

“I do not. My cousin was not expected for dinner; indeed, he only returned from the Continent late that evening.”

“And at what time do you suppose he came here to your chambers?”

“Well, I really don’t recollect. Eleven—twelve o’clock, perhaps. Yes, it must have been about twelve, I should say.”

"And you did not yourself leave home at all that night?"

"Most certainly not. I was with the friends who dined with me, as I told you."

"I see. Would you mind stating, Mr. Dennison, if you remarked anything at all unusual about your cousin's manner or appearance on that evening when he visited you?"

Dennison's eyes, when the question was asked, were bent gloomily on the carpet, as though he was still pondering over the death of that "simple country girl, whom he and his family had known and respected." He raised them now, with a sudden flash, a sudden glow, rather, of red light within their sombre depths, to Wickham's face, and for the first time during the interview a guilty look of confusion, of hesitation, crossed his own. If that look had been acted, Robert Dennison must have possessed the genius of a Kemble or a Kean! But it was genuine: and Mr. Wickham, tolerably versed in histrionic display, recognised its genuineness, and, being only human, built up a theory in his own mind on the instant.

Mr. Dennison was cool and collected in accounting for himself on that fatal evening of the 2nd; was betrayed into an admission of Mr. Durant's untimely visit to him; and then, at the first question respecting Mr. Durant's demeanour, hesitated and grew confused. What, unless he had grounds for suspecting his cousin's implication in the girl's fate, should cause this change in him? If he was positive of Durant's innocence, what made the last a more embarrassing question to answer than any of the former ones?

"I have no right to expect a reply, Mr. Dennison,

but it rests with you to refuse to give me one, and I repeat my question again. Did you see anything unusual in your cousin's manner or appearance on that evening of the 2nd when he visited you?"

Under certain conditions of extreme nervous tension most men must have experienced the sudden enlargement of grasp and vision with which the brain seems to become endowed. Before the mind of the huntsman whose horse is galloping towards a precipice, of the prisoner at the bar waiting for the first word of the foreman's lips, the concentrated perceptions of a dozen ordinary years seem to crowd in those few moments of agonized surprise. It was thus with Robert Dennison now. As Wickham questioned him about Gerald, and as he looked up with that expression of doubt, of guilt beyond even his subtlety to hide, upon his face, a train of reasoning, a summing-up of possibilities that it would take me pages to elaborate, had passed—mechanically, it seemed to him; he was in no condition just then for any sensible exercise of will—across his brain. He remembered all the country rumours, never fully set at rest, with respect to Gerald and Maggie Hall; the strong motive for being rid of her which his relations with Lucia might be supposed to supply; remembered Gerald's strange manner and significant remark of having seen "a Staffordshire face" upon the evening of the dinner-party; remembered, finally, that the only proofs which had ever existed of his own marriage were ashes since yesterday! So much for the past. Now for the future.

If Gerald were publicly accused of having had any share, direct or indirect, in Maggie Hall's death, he was, unless he could positively establish his innocence,

irrevocably ruined. And on Gerald's ruin—the ruin of the man who had stood to him and to his secret so staunchly—might rest his own strongest hope of salvation. At this moment the die was probably being cast on which the lives of one, or both, of them should hang. This moment, if ever, was the time for him to speak. Should he not speak? He had committed no crime. He had only made a foolish marriage: only neglected a low-born wife of whom death had ridded him. (Ay, but a shameful death—such a death as would make true men shrink from him, true women keep him from their houses: a death that, if known, would be a blot upon his name, a barrier in his path, such as her life, had she lived, could never have been!) And if the worst came to the worst, *that* only could be discovered. His presence at home on the night of her death was a fact to be proved by half a dozen witnesses. He could but come, eventually, to the shame of having concealed his marriage, and—and the cowardice of having left another man, an honest man and a generous, to bear the burthen of his guilt!

Robert Dennison's face blanched to an awful grey; the dark, massive-hewn lips trembled, almost for the first time in his life. "I—I must have time!" he stammered. "How can I undertake to remember whether there was anything unusual in my cousin's manner or not?"

"In other words, Mr. Dennison, you decline giving any answer to the question."

Dennison covered his face with his hands, and felt with a start the cold thick dew that was standing upon his forehead. To what dark suspicions against himself

might not this vacillation, this womanish sentimental weakness, give birth? What had he to do with Quixotic remorse about Gerald's possible danger? Gerald's unstained innocence of course would be his shield. Of what good is unstained innocence if it requires alien assistance in time of need?

"You are perfectly right, Mr. Wickham. I decline answering any question except upon matters that concern me alone. Of those I will answer as many as it pleases you to ask." And he rose from his chair, and folding his arms, turned round and confronted Wickham with a look that told him plainly he considered it time for their interview to be at an end.

Mr. Wickham got up in a moment, and took his hat and stick from the chair where he had deposited them. "I fully appreciate your motives, Mr. Dennison," he remarked, "and know that you act as one gentleman should do towards another, particularly a relation. The case is a very painful one—it seems likely to me will become more painful still—but I hope you don't think I have exceeded my duty, sir, in the questions that I have asked?"

No, answered Mr. Dennison, stiffly, he did not. In such a calling as Mr. Wickham's, no doubt it was a duty to go through many interviews as fruitless and as painful to the feelings of the people concerned in them as this one had been to him. And then he consulted his watch, and after comparing it carefully—for his nerve had thoroughly returned to him now—with the clock above the mantelpiece, remarked that it was already past his dinner-hour.

"And you will have no objection, Mr. Dennison, I suppose, to give me the addresses of the different gen-

tllemen who dined with you on the 2nd?" said Wickham, taking out a well-worn note-book from his pocket. "This is the last question with which at present I am obliged to trouble you."

Robert Dennison hesitated for a second, then determined that, at the pass to which he had now come, truth, literal, uncompromising truth, was the safest path for him to tread in. He had told no falsehood yet, had not compromised his cousin in aught. If a train of unforeseen coincidences should hereafter draw down false suspicion upon Gerald, it would be for Gerald to clear himself. His own safest course—nay, his own duty now—was to act as straightforwardly as honour consistently would allow him to act, and leave the future to shape itself as it might.

"I am perfectly ready, sir, to tell you where any friend of mine lives. Mr. Charteris, Mr. Drury, Mr. Broughton, Mr. McIvor;" and he gave him the address of each in full.

"And your cousin, Mr. Gerald Durant?" asked Wickham, pausing after he had carefully written down the different addresses that Dennison gave him.

"My cousin, Mr. Durant, lives in the same house with Mr. McIvor, 102, Clarges Street."

"Thank you, Mr. Dennison. I am very much obliged for the way in which you have answered my questions. Good evening to you, sir. In a few more days I shall probably find it necessary to call upon you again." With which comforting assurance, Dennison having answered that he should of course be willing to see him on business whenever he chose to call, Mr. Wickham took his leave.

It was within a few seconds of a quarter past seven when he turned out of the Temple into Fleet Street, and for a moment Mr. Wickham stood and pondered irresolute. These young West-end swells, he thought, generally dined about eight. He might have time yet to get a look at Mr. Durant on his way to his club, for Mr. Wickham was quite intimate with the habits of Guardsmen, as indeed he was intimate with the habits of every class of men in London. At all events, there could be no harm done by looking him up; seeing the house he lived in; speaking, perhaps, to his servant; getting hold, as it were, of the first end of the thread, which should serve as a clue hereafter to Mr. Durant's ways of life. He had broken in already upon all his other business by the number of hours he had devoted to Mrs. Sherborne; the remainder of the day might as well be given over to the same case; the case which Mr. Wickham's professional acumen already made him feel was likely to turn out a very different one to the common-place "street accident" which this morning he and his confrères had believed it to be. To have traced out the old trite story of poverty and of misery to its old trite source had been but a sorry triumph for a man of Wickham's standing. To bring home abduction, cruelty, desertion, if nothing worse, against a man in the position of this Mr. Durant, was a prospect that stimulated the keenest emotions, the highest ambitions, of his breast. Yes, he decided he would lose no unnecessary time; he would, at least, call at the house where the young Guardsman lived, at least put something in train ready for to-morrow's work. And hailing another hansom as he reached the Strand, he jumped in; a quarter of an hour later discharged it with his

accustomed discreetness in Piccadilly; and then proceeded leisurely and on foot to No. 102, Clarges Street.

His ring was answered, as it chanced, not by the servants of the house, but by Gerald's own gentleman, Mr. Bennett; who, elegantly but plainly dressed, was just starting on his own pleasure—possibly to dine at his own club—and who held his nose very high in the air on perceiving “the sort of person” who was making inquiries for his master.

“The vally,” thought Wickham, taking poor Mr. Bennett's accurate measure with half a glance. “Ah ah, young man! you and I will have a good deal to say to each other before we've done, I dare say!” Then aloud, “Mr. Durant gone out of town, has he? Well, and when do you expect him back to town, my friend?” resting one of his strong arms within the door, carelessly, as it seemed, but just sufficient to hinder Mr. Bennett from slamming it in his face, as he appeared to have every intention of doing.

The term “my friend,” the outstretched arm, and a certain latent expression in Wickham's eyes, brought down the nose of the gentleman's gentleman by some inches. Mr. Gerald Durant, he knew, was as much in debt as any man keeping above water at all can be; and it suddenly struck Mr. Bennett's intelligence that the visitor, as likely as not, was a sheriff's officer, with whom it might be prudent for him to hold civil parlanche during his master's absence.

“Well, I don't suppose Mr. Durant will be away more than three or four days. We generally stay about that when we go to the Court. If there's any message I can take, I shall be very happy.” Mr. Bennett, out of his master's presence, had quite the proper drawl

of high life. "I rather believe I'm going down there myself to-morrow." Languidly this, and as if travelling was an intense bore to a London man of his *far niente* habits.

"No, no. I don't want to send any message," said Wickham, and as he spoke he stepped quietly inside the passage. "You are Mr. Durant's vally, I suppose? I thought so. Then we're all among friends. The fact is, you see"—lowering his voice, and pushing to, but not shutting the door, "your master owes a pretty round sum of money to a certain friend of mine"—the broad facts of human nature told Mr. Wickham that this was a hypothesis likely to savour of reality in the case of any young Guardsman, "and I've just called round to see if things could not be arranged quiet and agreeable for all parties. Now, my friend has no more wish than I have to press matters too hard; and of course it's to his advantage, and the young gentleman's advantage—to all our advantages, I may say—that your master should keep on terms with his uncle, Sir John Durant. I understood you right? he has gone to his uncle's house in Staffordshire now? Yes. Well, then, give us your opinion—between friends, of course—is Mr. Durant all square with the old gentleman, do you think? *and* his daughter? for you see I know the whole family history by heart. If he is, and if everything's likely to come off pleasant, and soon, my friend's the last man—the last man living," said Mr. Wickham, warmly, "to be down on any young gentleman of good prospects."

And led away by the visitor's genial manner, feeling thoroughly convinced, too, that his own first view of his vocation was a correct one, Mr. Bennett spoke.

Right? Why, lord love you!—for being in earnest he forgot to be elegant—nothing could be more right. A coolness? Well, he had never heard anything of it, or never seen anything of it himself. Mr. Durant corresponded frequently with all the family, and the marriage for certain would not be delayed beyond next autumn. They had not been home three days from the Continent now, and Mr. Durant was off to the Court already—one of the finest seats and oldest families in Staffordshire, that and Lord Sandford's, which was the most intimate friend old Sir John had; and it *was* said meant between them to put Mr. Gerald Durant into parliament at the “disillusion,” which he, Mr. Bennett, believed to be on the eve of taking place.

“So I’m told, so I’m told,” said Mr. Wickham, after pausing a moment and tapping his chin reflectively with the head of his stick; “but, not being a political character myself, can’t say. At all events, Mr. Bennett, it’s a great matter for a young gentleman to keep on terms with elderly relatives—especially when those elderly relatives have money and only daughters! and—the advice I mean to give to my friend is to have patience for a bit. I might look round here again in the course of a week or so, and I might not,” added Mr. Wickham, candidly, as he pushed open the door and went out into the street again. “But if I did, it would be as between friends, you understand, Mr. Bennett? Just to pick up a word or two from you as to how things are going on.”

Mr. Bennett nodded intelligently; congratulating himself meanwhile upon the success of his own admirable diplomacy.

“Nowhere near here where I should be likely to

see you without coming to the house?" hazarded Mr. Wickham; and turning round as though the thought had struck him suddenly when he was already moving away from the door. "If there's one thing I hate more than another in these matters, it is formality. Patience and a friendly spirit, I say to my clients, is a great deal more likely to get money out of a young gentleman in difficulties than dunning and tormenting and bothering his life out! and if there *was* any place, Mr. Bennett, any place that you frequent, as one may say, at odd hours?"

Thus pressed, Mr. Bennett admitted that there was a retreat in which a good many of his leisure hours, of an evening especially, were passed: the Star and Raffle, a public on your right as you turned down the adjoining mews towards Half-Moon Street. Hearing which, Mr. Wickham, with a friendly nod and a remark that if he had occasion again to see Mr. Bennett, the Star and Raffle would be the place where he should seek him, started forth in excellent spirits upon his homeward road.

He had gained no direct evidence certainly by his visit to Clarges Street; but he had heard enough collectively, during his afternoon's work, to convince him that suspicion, sinister and thick, was gathering fast around Gerald Durant. And a light shone in Mr. Wickham's keen eyes as he walked. No more human emotion stirred in him at hunting down the evidence that should destroy a man's life than stirs in an etymologist as he unravels the knotty derivations of a Greek verb; or in a geologist as he searches for tidings of the Stone Age among the implements of the drift. The "London Bridge Case" had been made over into

his hands; and he was simply performing his day's duty conscientiously before going home to his cottage garden and his little children at Kentish Town. If Mr. Durant was innocent, so much the better for Mr. Durant: if guilty, so much the better for his own professional reputation. And reviewing all that he had gathered to-day—Mrs. Sherborne's story of the old county scandal; Robert Dennison's hardly-wrung admission of his cousin's visit on the evening of the 2nd; the confession of the valet that his master was in difficulties, and looked to a wealthy marriage for his rehabilitation—reviewing all this evidence, line by line, almost word for word, and adding it to certain other facts already in his possession, Mr. Wickham felt as sure as he had ever felt of anything in his life that he held the first links of a successful chain of evidence within his hands.

As he passed out of Clarges Street into Bolton Row he stopped—following an old constabulary habit of early days, rather than for any particular reason—and took a look down each of the four openings for a few seconds. Then, as he twisted round with the peculiar pivot-action of the profession, found himself nose to nose, almost in the arms of a gentleman who at that moment was in the act of turning into Clarges Street. The gentleman was dressed in very well-cut evening clothes, partially concealed by a gossamer over-coat of the same pale colour as his face and hair; and in his button-hole was a dandy bouquet, and in his eye an eye-glass.

“Deuce take you!” he drawled; as the sudden turn of Mr. Wickham's robust person sent him, with a shock, about six inches from his sphere, and the dandy bou-

quet flying across the pavement. "I must really beg, sir——"

And then their eyes met, and the sequel of the bellicose command remained for ever unspoken.

"Why, Jemmy!" cried Wickham, laying his hand familiarly on the other's shoulder, and looking carefully up and down every item of his dress, from the exquisite boots up to the single pearl (Palais Royal, I fear) of his necktie—"Jemmy! whatever lay are you on now?"

"Well," said Jemmy, perfectly calmly, the first momentary surprise over, "I'm on what I fancy, in your profession, is termed the swell lay, Mr. Wickham, so it's annoying, isn't it, to have my bouquet smashed? You haven't half a crown you could lend me, I suppose, to buy another? I'm just going to dine with a friend of mine down here, and come out as usual without a farthing of change about me."

The request, or the tone in which it was made, had evidently the effect of a very excellent joke upon Mr. Wickham. "It's a most singular fact, Mr. Harcourt," he answered with great *bonhomie*, "Harcourt—Vavasor—Vere de Vere! whatever the alias is now—but I was just going to ask a similar favour of you. I haven't a farthing's worth of change about me, as luck will have it. However, you're quite swell enough," he added, looking admiringly at him anew. "Swell enough to dine at the Carlton, or the Guards' Club either I'm sure."

"Ah, that's just where I happen to be going," responded Jemmy, pleasantly. "Odd, is it not, that you should have guessed? I'm just going to call on my

friend Durant, here in Clarges Street, and walk round with him to his club to dinner."

"Mr. Gerald Durant, 102, Clarges Street?"

Jemmy nodded; not in the least surprised, apparently, at Wickham's knowing any number of particulars on any given subject.

"Are you going to dine with him by invitation?"

"No, not exactly by invitation. I made acquaintance with him over the other side of the water, and he asked me to look him up when I came to town, so knowing his hours——"

"You thought you would do him the honour of dining at his club, and if by a fluke you could get into the card-room, teach him to play écarté afterwards?"

"I've taught him that already," interpolated Jemmy, with a little innocent smile.

"Then, my friend, you won't repeat the lesson to-day. Mr. Gerald Durant is in Staffordshire."

"Ah?"

"In Staffordshire, and not likely to be back for some time. You made a pretty good lunch to-day, I hope, Jemmy?"

"Well, no; I made a very bad one. I meant to dine with Durant. The fact is, I've only been in town a few hours, and the dust one swallows here is food enough at first to a man unaccustomed for some years to his native air. Wonderful, really, how people contrive to live in London!"

"Ah, it is—it is wonderful how some people contrive to live anywhere," answered Wickham; not in the least intending to be ironical, and again looking with highly complimentary approval at his friend's appear-

ance. "I suppose now, Mr. Randall"—for a moment Jemmy did change countenance at that word—"you would not condescend to come and have a bit of dinner with me? I know of a tidy place or two Oxford Street way, and——"

"Nothing would suit me better, I assure you," interrupted Jemmy, easily. "While we live we must dine, and if not at the Guards' Club, why in Oxford Street; provided always it is at the expense of another man."

And a few minutes later the pair, arm in arm, and deep in conversation, were making their way northward through Berkeley Square. No play for Mr. Wickham with the children in the little Kentish Town garden to night. As a random shot, hoping only to pick up stray hints as to Gerald Durant's comings and goings abroad, he had invited his newly-found friend to accompany him. With the first answer given by "Jemmy" on the subject, he saw that chance had thrown him across another and most important witness regarding the last day of Margaret Hall's life: and on the spot, Mr. Wickham decided that the "bit of dinner" should change into an affair of courses and champagne.

Tea and toast had been sufficient to appease the honest bucolic scruples of Mrs. Sherborne. A conscience of a highly sensitive (and expensive) order had to be set at rest now.

CHAPTER IX.

Durant's Court.

THE light of a cloudless August morning was shining upon the old house and garden down in Staffordshire. Shining with ruddy warmth upon the glistening vari-coloured tiles in which the "rose and crampette," the family badge, was worked upon the pinnaced gables: flecking with shafts of quivering brightness the grey stone mullions of the narrow windows; illuminating in amber and gold the mouldering cartouche shield upon the eastern front which told, as well as you could decipher for ivy, how the house was built by a certain Hugh Durant, in the year of grace 1570, and where the Durant arms, lichen-grown, and stained with the weather of three hundred winters were sculptured.

August was the month of the year when the Court garden was at its zenith. Geraniums, calceolarias, verbenas, all were in their fullest blaze of colour now; nor was the sight the only sense gratified, as in too many modern gardens is the case. Far and wide across the lawns was blown the subtle, cinnamon fragrance of the cedars; clove carnations, and scented pinks were plentiful in the borders; the magnolia in the sheltered south angle of the Court was covered with blossoms that filled the air with their intoxicating sweetness—a sweetness to which the odour from peaches and nectarines in the pleached alleys close at hand was married most deliciously.

It was a garden that, once seen upon a summer morning like this, was apt to haunt, not your memory only, but your heart; as a sweet old tune does, or a fair and noble face out of one of Vandyck's pictures. Every part of it was laid out strictly in accordance with the fashion of the times in which the house was built. There were images cut in juniper or "other garden stuffe;" little stiff yew-hedges, with occasional pyramids, statues, and fountains; spacious turf-walks, set as in the days when Bacon wrote, with burnet, wild thyme, and water-mints to perfume the air when trodden upon and crushed, and in disregardance of all those rules of modern horticulture which keep fruit and flowers distinct, fruit-trees, espaliered, were ranged on either side of most of the bordered walks.

And in its quaint antiquity, in its defiance of science and of fashion, alike, lay the potency, the human element, of its charm. Just as within the walls of Durant's Court you were overcome by inseparable associations of the men who had been born and rejoiced over, who had sorrowed and died there, so under the cedars, and in the shaded walks and alleys of the garden, you were haunted by mute memories of the youthful vows that must have been exchanged, the youthful lips that must have kissed here in the lapse of time between Elizabeth and Victoria. The love-whispers of a dozen buried generations, the roses of three hundred or so dead Junes seemed to have left some lingering echo, some intangible pathetic fragrance in every nook and corner of the unchanged old place. Love was in its atmosphere! And with the August sun shining over all as it did now, the warm air rich with odours, alive with the hum of bees and voices of birds,

it looked as fitting a scene as could have been found anywhere for the enactment of the first brightest act in the play of life. A fitting background to the two figures, a young man's and a girl's, who were standing together on the lawn beneath the cedars; the sun flickering down on the girl's white dress and delicate cheek as she looked up with quiet happiness, with the perfect assurance of acknowledged and requited love, into her companion's face.

For Gerald and Lucia were once more openly affianced lovers; and Lady Durant, too happy in her heart to see them so, no longer gave lectures against undue demonstrations of feeling before marriage. Ten days had passed on now since the prodigal had first returned and been forgiven; and—while Mr. Wickham, with unslacked ardour, was pushing forward inquiries in London, and daily gaining fresh evidence in support of the case that he was working—no faintest rumour of the position in which he stood had as yet reached Gerald's own ears or to the Court. His first interview with Sir John Durant had been a characteristic one; the old man for the first five minutes vehemently declaring that unless his nephew could prove his innocence regarding Maggie Hall, he would never receive him back to his fireside or to his affection; and Gerald, with perfect firmness, but admirable courtesy and temper, declaring that he neither could nor would seek to prove one circumstance that should exonerate himself! "I have already told you, on my honour, that I am guiltless," he said, simply. "I have told you that I have had reasons impossible to explain for bearing the imputation silently hitherto, and it rests with you now, I think, to take the stigma away from me or not.

Say one word, sir, and I will leave your house in five minutes and return to it if you choose no more." And Sir John, looking into his handsome face, the face that had never lied to him during all the bygone years, had not only held out his hand to Gerald on the spot, but asked him with tears in his eyes to forgive them all for the wrong that they had done to him by their suspicions.

This was immediately after Gerald's arrival at the Court. On the very day following, Mrs. Sherborne, with her dark news of Maggie Hall's death, returned to Heathcotes; and while Lucia in the first happiness of reconciliation was wandering, her hand on Gerald's arm, through the woods and gardens of the Court, many were the whispered asides of the county world as to the opportuneness of Mr. Durant's return at this particular season, the heartlessness of Lady Durant in allowing him with such hot haste to be again the suitor of her daughter.

A woman who, at the best of times, barely tolerates the people she lives amongst, is sure of receiving pretty stringent criticism upon her actions when occasion arises. All the pottery ladies who had been snubbed—ignored, perhaps, is the juster word—by Lady Durant, felt it their duty now to express what they, as mothers, thought with regard to her conduct. As long as Maggie Hall lived, Mr. Durant—married, or unmarried, who should say?—had been banished from the Court: on the day succeeding her death—let it be hoped a death that was fairly come by!—he appeared openly among them again, as Miss Durant's future husband. Of course, every one trusted sincerely that Mr. Durant had had no share in the unhappy

girl's betrayal; still it must be confessed that things looked most suspicious against him, and that it would have been more delicate—not to say human—of Lady Durant had she allowed a little longer time to elapse before bringing him forward again in the eyes of the world at her daughter's side.

This was the outside, or neighbourly, view of the position; Lady Durant meanwhile leading her accustomed untroubled life, in happy ignorance of what was being whispered by the people who courted her bow as she drove abroad, or flocked round her carriage whenever it stopped in the village, to offer congratulations on the now openly-acknowledged engagement of her daughter. Led by the instinct which, in a true woman's heart so seldom errs, Lady Durant had never, from the first, shared her husband's suspicions against Gerald, and the only really strong feeling she had with regard to Mrs. Sherborne's story was—its indecorum. It was, of course, impossible actually to keep from Lucia the fact of her old playmate's death: the news told, and Lady Durant made an express request that no allusion should ever again be made to the subject in her hearing. It was about the first time in her calm, sequestered, selfish existence, that any of the grosser accidents of everyday life—passion, abandonment, despair: possibilities unrecognised by Mrs. Hannah More as ever likely to compromise the sensibility of any woman of refinement—had been thrust upon her own personal experience; and the easiest way of getting rid of the unpleasant sensations they occasioned was, obviously, not to talk about them. Poor, common, erring human nature being the one element which Lady Durant had never taken into consideration in her otherwise admirable scheme

of human life; she was about as well fitted to cope with any of its ordinary manifestations, as were the pious cloistered nuns fitted to cope with common storm and common sunshine, when the French Revolution first opened the convent doors and sent them adrift upon the world.

On one point only, kindly and charitable as she was, did the mistress of Durant's Court entertain any decided opinion in the matter, namely, that it was a very merciful thing it had pleased Providence the poor creature Maggie should have been taken. It was an awful judgment, upon herself, of course, and a solemn warning to all other young women in that condition of life; still, if a member of any good family *had* been implicated, as was supposed, in the unhappy girl's flight, it was a mercy for which that family, and, indeed, all right-thinking persons; could not be too thankful that she was "released." And when Mrs. Sherborne went away, with tear-stained face and aching heart, after the first dreaded ordeal of breaking the news at the Court, the honest woman felt duly cast down at the benignity of Providence with respect to the gentry (as contradistinguished from the lower classes) which Lady Durant, in a lecture of an hour and a half, had pointed out to her.

"My lady spoke up beautiful," she told her husband that night; "all 'about the wicked cease from troubling,' and other texty's, Thomas; but Sir John, he cares most at heart for our poor girl's death. The tears were in Sir John's eyes, mark you, and when my lady had gone away he says to me, 'Mrs. Sherborne, be satisfied the right shall be done yet, and whoever did this thing, or caused the girl to do it, shall be

brought to justice if I've any power to bring him there.' My lady's very kind and very good, but she has her feeling, you see, Thomas, as a lady, and Sir John he has his feelings as a gentleman; and nothing can be more different than the feelings of a lady and of a gentleman," added Mrs. Sherborne, "where a handsome girl like poor Maggie is concerned."

And she was right. In small domestic matters the kindly weak old man was, happily for himself, entirely under his wife's domination. In any position where he felt his honour, however remotely, to be touched he consulted no one. And honour and justice alike called upon him to be in some sort the champion of the dead girl; every plough-boy, every dairy-servant on his estate, being, according to the old man's stately feudal ideas, a rightful claimant upon his protection. That Gerald had been wholly innocent of taking Margaret Hall from her home, he believed now upon his soul. On whose head the guilt of her death lay, God only knew! but had his own son lived, and Sir John Durant suspected him of being the man, he would have felt it his plain duty as a gentleman to help to bring him to justice.

It was a case simply in which every chivalrous instinct of his nature bade him take up the side of the weak against the strong. Towards the follies which men, collectively, have agreed to condone, or call by no worse name than follies, Sir John Durant's conscience was as passively elastic as are the consciences of most men who have lived their threescore years and ten on the earth. He was no Don Quixote to espouse the cause of a dairy-girl who of her own free-will had forsaken her duty, and then—following the natural

law of such matters—been forsaken in her turn. But Mrs. Sherborne's story, the vague insinuations of the newspapers, had hinted to him a far darker suspicion than that of abandoned love or broken trust; the suspicion that Margaret Hall, a lawfully-married wife, had come by her death unfairly. And quietly, and without speaking to any one in the house of what he had done, the old man wrote off at once to his London lawyer, desiring him to inquire into the circumstances of the "London Bridge case" at once, and, if need be, offer a reward in his name for the discovery of any person or persons concerned in the girl's death. "She had been accidentally identified as a farm-servant of one of his oldest tenants," he wrote, "and some suspicion seeming to rest upon the manner of her death, he felt it a kind of personal duty to encourage the fullest investigation in the matter." And the reward of 100*l.* had been duly offered and posted; and Mr. Wickham—knowing the quarter from whence it came—had prosecuted his researches with redoubled energy, duly informing Sir John Durant's lawyer how the case was being successfully "worked," and how quiet and patience were, he believed, all that was requisite to bring home guilt to the rightful party in this mysterious affair. Every word of which intelligence was read morning after morning by Sir John at the breakfast-table, with Gerald sitting at Lucia's side, and Gerald's face and laugh making the old room bright as it had never been during the last bitter months of his estrangement from the Court.

Robert Dennison's name, as if by tacit consent, was seldom mentioned among them during this time. Once or twice old Sir John had said something about writing

and making Robert come down, with Conyers, to talk over electioneering matters, and Gerald each time had remarked, in a joking tone, but with a serious face, that he should certainly go back to London for the occasion; old Conyers and Robert Dennison discussing business being something altogether out of his sphere. The days, however, passed on without Dennison either writing or making his appearance; and as it was now near the middle of August, Sir John began to say that Robert must certainly have gone out of town—probably out of England, as usual, for the rest of the vacation—a belief which Gerald, who shrank from meeting his cousin as though he had himself been the guilty one of the two, was not slow to encourage.

As much as it was in his easy nature to despise anyone, he despised Robert Dennison now. A man might be cynical, selfish, facile-principled, and so long as he was a gentleman, so long as his failings were decently glossed over by refinement, Gerald Durant could like him still. What were the majority of the men he lived amongst, and called by the name of friends? Whether Robert Dennison had or had not been legally married to Maggie Hall, there were no present means—setting aside the evidence of those two letters he had returned to him in Morteville—of telling. Married, or not married, there could of course be little doubt as to his wearying in six weeks of the poor creature's society; and Gerald was the last man to blame another for the inconstancy of feeling which in his own case he regarded as a happy natural infirmity, rather than an error. But would not a man of common manliness, a man possessing one of the instincts of a gentleman, have shielded all the more scrupulously

from evil the helpless girl to whom love bound him no more? To win a woman from her duty was, according to Gerald's light, what many a good fellow would do under strong temptation: to tire of her—well, to tire of everything is an inseparable condition of human existence! but to refuse a woman, so won, protection while she lived; to put her away from her rightful place, if indeed he had been unfortunate enough to marry her—was the conduct of a blackguard. (A fine distinction, perhaps, but none the less real to a man educated as Gerald Durant had been.) Maggie Hall had died a forlorn wanderer upon the London streets—for with bitterest self-reproach Gerald's memory recalled to him the woman of whose face he had caught a glimpse upon the bridge, and whom, in his Sybarite shrinking from misery, he had left to perish: the woman whom Archie Lovell sought to save! He remembered how that wan face haunted him: remembered how he had spoken of it, "the ghost of a Staffordshire face," in Dennison's chambers: remembered the tone of Dennison's voice, the cold sneer that rose upon his lips as he answered. And yet at that moment as he sat there with his friends, in his well-appointed rooms, after his excellent dinner and wines, he must have known what dark shame was in truth possible . . . the fresh face he had wooed bared to the disgrace of London gaslight! the woman who had been his love exposed to horrors of which a violent and self-sought death was the lightest!

In his own way, Gerald Durant was capable of actions that—viewed altogether from the heights—were as intrinsically wrong, perhaps, as any of Robert Dennison's; and yet, in a higher and very different

degree, he felt himself as removed from the level of his cousin now, as Waters had felt himself removed from the level of his Morteville associates. For Gerald, whatever his faults, had always been, always must be, a gentleman, "*sans peur et sans reproche*." He had been brought up to think that the unstained honour of a dozen generations, at least, of Durants had descended to him; and that every good thing of life, nay, life itself, should always be held ready for sacrifice in his hand, sooner than that one jot or one tittle of that bright inheritance should be allowed to pass away. And any man who believes himself to be a heritor by birth of what the world calls honour (or dishonour) is already far upon the road towards meriting the title by his actions. The code on which the Durant principles were framed was not by any means a transcendental or a perfect one. It was simply the very common-place, faulty, narrow code, which men of the world unquestioningly hold to embody honour. But, whatever its leniency on some points, it branded falsehood and cowardice with the brand of shame irretrievable: and in his heart, Gerald felt himself forced to acknowledge that Robert Dennison was capable of both! He had no more thought of betraying him now than he had had during all the bygone months, when his own ruin had so nearly been the price of his generosity. Robert was a poor man; and a single breath of such a story as this might be enough to blight his professional prospects for life. Robert was Lucia's first cousin, Sir John Durant's nephew; and to sully his fair fame was in some measure to sully the fair fame of the family. He would keep his counsel; stand by him, outwardly, with the same staunchness still; only—and this Gerald felt

with daily, hourly-increasing repugnance—he could never again make Dennison his companion, could never again bear to see his smooth face here at the Court, or at Lucia's side. Here, in the quiet old garden, under the dear old trees where falsehood, cowardice, dishonour, were words unknown: the trees under whose shade Robert first wooed as his wife the girl who now lay in a nameless London grave and with only darkest disgrace and shame written over her for her epitaph.

Such thoughts, joined to other personal ones by no means void of pain—for Archie Lovell was neither forgotten nor unavenged in his heart—had made Gerald a somewhat silent and spiritless lover during these early days of his renewed engagement with Lucia. At the present moment, however, standing after an excellent breakfast in the pleasant morning air; his admirable havanna between his lips; the sunlight, the smell of flowers, the song of birds, the sight of Lucia herself—fresh, pure, simple as the white dress she wore—all ministering to the gratification of his keen-strung, pleasure-craving nature, every dark thought seemed very far indeed from Gerald Durant. The singularly false platitude about the inability of money to purchase enjoyment is never more false than when applied to a man like Gerald. Good horses, good wines, a good cook; a place like the Court to live in during the shooting season; were precisely, now that his youth was waning—at six-and-twenty!—the things which he knew himself to need. In another five years, when he should have done for ever with balls, and every other lingering folly of his youth, a favourite arm-chair at the club when he was in town; horses that were somewhat heavier weight-carriers in the country; and a

better chef and better wines than ever, constantly. And all this lay before him in the common course of things if he married Lucia; and she was a very nice girl, poor little thing! fair, gentle, and feminine; and really looking her best, looking as only English girls can look now, with the morning light searching out her uncovered face and discovering no flaw thereon; and the golden sun giving her smooth dust-coloured hair a tinge of red which made it almost—almost for one passing moment—look like Archie's.

"And what sort of people are these—Lovells, did you say? these new people at the Rectory?" Gerald had been in town the last two days and had only returned to the Court late last night. "What is this Miss Lovell like who is coming here? Pretty, I hope?"

"Oh, *dear* no," answered Miss Durant, decisively. "Not in the least. I called at the Rectory yesterday, and mamma and I both thought her quite plain. A freckled brown skin, and red hair, and large mouth, and so odd mannered. I hope you won't mind her coming, Gerald? but you know we did not expect you till this evening, and mamma is anxious I should be friendly to the poor girl. You won't mind her now, will you?"

"Well, if she is plain, Lucia, I certainly shall not; neither mind her nor look at her. Whatever she was," he added, in answer to a certain look that he read in Miss Durant's eyes, "I should not be likely to think much of her or any one else when you are by, Lucia!" And throwing away the end of his cigar, Mr. Durant put his arm round his cousin's waist and drew her to his side.

"Oh Gerald, please, how can you! only think if mamma—"

"Mamma's jurisdiction is over," he interrupted her. "If mamma was looking through the window, as I dare say she is, I should make a point of——"

"Oh Gerald, oh please, don't!" cried Miss Durant, her fair face crimson. "Miss Lovell may be here any minute. Just think if the new rector's daughter was to see me like this!"

"Well, I suppose rector's daughters are sometimes engaged to their first cousins, and even have dim glimmerings of the fearful results of such a position," said Gerald. "Don't be a baby, Lucia! for mercy's sake, don't be a baby any longer—I shall like you so much better if you are not—and now come in, and let's have some music, child. I heard you mur——practising something out of Dinorah this morning, and I want to give you a lesson. If you leave off being a baby and learn to sing well—and you have really a very nice voice—I shall be so fond of you, Lucia."

And, his arm around her still, they went through the open French window into the drawing-room together; and then Gerald seated himself at the piano, and while Lucia looked for her music, began rambling, as his way was, from one air to another till he reached Fortunio's song which brought his thoughts back abruptly, and with singular distinctness, to Archie Lovell.

"You are always singing that thing," said Miss Durant, as she returned, her arms full of music, to his side. "I can't think why you are so fond of it. I see nothing in it at all."

"No? Perhaps you don't understand it, Lucia," answered Gerald, taking his hands away from the keys,

and sighing inwardly as he glanced at the goodly pile of songs that his beloved had brought.

"Not understand? Why I understand French as well as English. *Si vous croyez*"—Lucia's accent was very British indeed—"que je vais dire. If you believe that I am going to say whom I dare to love, I should not know for an empire——"

"Ah, Lucia, for pity!" interrupted Gerald, jumping up, and clasping a hand on each side of his head. "Sing, my child, sing 'Beautiful Star,' or 'Ever of Thee,' or any other of your favourites, but for heaven's sake don't meddle with mine. Never translate French again, there's a good girl. I shall be so much fonder of you, Lucia, if you don't try to translate French again."

"But did I not translate it accurately, Gerald? Was I wrong in one word? *Si vous croyez*——"

"Sing," interrupted Gerald, peremptorily—and making her sit down before the piano—"What? Oh, anything in the world that you like—this." And taking up the first song from the heap she had deposited on the top of the instrument, he opened it before her, and Lucia sang.

She had a tolerably correct ear, and a really nice voice; and she had been taught as well as English masters in the country do teach, and when it was marked *piano* in the score she sang soft, and when *forte*, loud: and she played her accompaniments correctly; and altogether irritated Gerald more thoroughly than any singer he had ever listened to in his life.

He had many tastes—love, pictures, books, good horses, good wines—but only one passion: and that passion was music. He could sit through the longest

classical concerts—the first English guardsman, I believe, of whom the fact has been recorded—with acute unmixed enjoyment: could pass any number of hours listening to the choruses of Greek or Italian sailors, when he was yachting in the Mediterranean: could hear, with a certain pleasure even the “*belle voix fausse*,” of Theresa, herself. No music in which music was, from the highest rendering of Beethoven down to the rude choruses of half a dozen sailors, or, lower far, the songs of a café chantant, came amiss to him. He said of himself that he would rather have bad music than no music; and, with the exception of Lucia’s singing, this was true. But Lucia’s singing was a thing apart: perhaps because he knew he was going to listen to it all his life. He got actually hot and irritable, when he listened to her—it was so correctly irreproachable, so utterly inexplicably void of nature, feeling, sympathy.

“Brava, brava, Lucia!” This when four consecutive modern English songs had been sung to him, without the omission of a verse, without the wrong playing of a bar; with only that subtle want in every note that caused him such intolerable suffering as he listened. “Of the songs themselves I don’t think much, but you really sing them most—correctly. Now, shall we try something of a different kind—that air from *Dinorah* I heard you singing this morning?”

“Just as you like, but I have not near done my English songs yet. However, I can go back to them afterwards, if the rector’s daughter is not here. ‘*Sei vendicati assai*;’” the Italian accent, if possible, more loyally British than the French one; “it’s rather low, but Mr. Bligh thinks my lower notes quite as good as my high ones.” And then *dolce* and *piano*, and gradu-

ally *crescendo*, according to the printed directions, Miss Durant went on duly with the execution of the song.

Gerald heard her out in patient martyrdom through one verse, and into the middle of the second; then he made a sudden swoop down upon her hands, and before Miss Durant had had time to recover herself, had dispossessed her from her place at the piano and seated himself there instead.

"My dear Gerald, what *is* the matter?" she cried, in her little prim old-maidish way, and smoothing down the ruffled bows of blue ribbon at her wrists. "Do you really mean that I don't know that song perfect? Why, Mr. Bligh said—"

"You know it—perfectly perfect, Lucia! You sing it like a bird! only, do you see, the circumstances under which the young man in the opera sings that song, are not cheerful ones, and a little—just a little more expression—is demanded than you give to the words. If you remark now, at this particular point, we are told that the voice is to be '*suffocato dalle lagrime*.' He is calling upon the woman he has lost, you know——"

"I know;" Miss Durant always knew everything; "Mr. Bligh told me, and said I attended to all the marks very carefully indeed. It's quite absurd to take things literally in songs," added Lucia, wisely. "I am no more choked with tears than I am ready to expire at anyone's feet, and as Mr. Bligh says——"

"Shall I sing it to you, Lucia?" interrupted Gerald, who felt himself going mad every time Mr. Bligh's name was mentioned; "I can't play the accompaniment right, because, as you know, I play more than half by ear; but I really can, Lucia, if you would only be-

lieve me, show you the kind of feeling that should be thrown into the song."

"Oh, yes Gerald, I shall be very glad to hear you. Still I assure you Mr.—"

But, before that horrible name could sound again, began a low, plaintive prelude—at which Miss Durant smiled pityingly, inasmuch as it was not the accompaniment written and printed, and taught to her by Mr. Bligh—a minute later and Gerald's voice was filling the room with its rich flood of true and natural music. As he sang he forgot his little irritation against Lucia; remembered only the part into which, with all the fervour of his happy temperament, he had thrown himself in a moment; and when he reached the point at which he had interrupted her,

*"Rispondia a chi t'implora,
Rispondi' o cara a me!"*

Mr. Durant put his right arm round Lucia's waist, and turned his face caressingly up to hers as the soft Italian words of tenderness and despair floated from his lips.

No picture of mutual and happy love could be prettier than the one they formed at this moment: Lucia in her white dress, and with her slight figure and fair young head half bending over, half turning away from her cousin; Gerald with one hand lightly touching the keys, the other clasped round the girl's slender waist as—his lips parted, his handsome eyes softening with the passionate meaning of the music—he looked up, full and imploringly, into her face.

And the picture was not unseen. A step, unheard, had come up to the open window; a figure, unnoticed,

had stood and watched all that little love scene: and then and there—and while in very truth his imagination was addressing Archie Wilson, not Lucia Durant—died by sudden death, whatever fancy for Gerald had once existed in the heart of the woman he loved, or believed he could have loved, best on earth.

“Miss—Miss Lovell!” cried Lucia, starting away from Gerald’s arm as the figure moved at last, and a shadow falling across the pages of the song told her that they were not alone. “I beg your pardon, but we were singing, and the time went so quickly—”

“Lady Durant told me to come this way,” said a voice quietly; a voice that seemed to send every drop of blood in his body to Gerald’s heart. “Don’t let me interrupt you, please, unless your song is finished.”

And then, with calm and stately self-possession, the new rector’s daughter walked into the room.

Gerald had prepared himself from Lucia’s description, for a red-haired, repulsive young person of six-and-twenty; a young person carrying a basket, and requesting subscriptions, and generally speaking through her nose, and talking of the parish and the Sunday-schools. He turned round, startled by the voice, and full before him, fresher, brighter than he had ever seen her yet, stood Archie.

“Risponchia a chi t’implora,
Rispondi’ o cara a me!”

His prayer was answered already; but Mr. Durant did not feel near as comfortable as he had done when dying musically of despair, his arm round Lucia’s waist, a minute ago.

CHAPTER X.

Archie pays her Debt.

SHE was cold as ice, and received the profound bow under which Gerald sought to cover his confusion as Lucia introduced them with a dignified little bend of the neck that to Miss Durant seemed impertinent. The rector's daughter to assume a manner like this when she was being introduced to the future husband of Miss Durant of Durant!

"We had not expected Mr. Durant until this evening," she explained, as though to let the poor young person know that her being in Mr. Durant's society at all arose solely from mistake. "Would you like to take your hat off, Miss Lovell, or shall we go out a little first? You have not seen the gardens yet, I think."

"I will do whatever you like," answered Miss Lovell, still standing by the window where she had entered, and still with the self-possession upon her face that in Lucia's sight was so unbefitting. "I shall not be able to stay more than an hour or two, so don't make any difference for me at all, please."

"Oh, but Miss Lovell, mamma invited you to spend the day. I hope——"

"Thanks. I can only stay an hour or two. My father wants me this afternoon." And Archie half turned away from the lovers, and leaning her arm—more with the gesture of a boy than of a young lady, Lucia thought—against the window frame, looked out into the garden.

Miss Durant glanced at Gerald, as though to say "Was I not right? Are we not going to be bored with this awkward, plain young woman I told you of?" and saw that a crimson flush was dyeing Mr. Durant's fair face, and that his eyes were intently fixed upon a song that, in his first bewilderment, he had caught up and was holding in his hand. Evidently he was annoyed by the girl's curt indifferent reception of him; evidently, too, he thought her ugly and repulsive, and wanted to be rid of her.

The latter consideration lent a great deal more kindness to Miss Durant's feelings towards her visitor. The poor thing had been invited to spend the day with them; came shyly, no doubt, at paying a first visit alone to the Court—and the Court to Lucia seemed much the same as the Imperial Court of St. Petersburg would seem to the Emperor of all the Russias—and now, finding herself *de trop*, offered humbly to go away again in an hour or two.

"We shall not hear of you leaving us till after luncheon, Miss Lovell, and then, if you really must go, you shall give me a promise to come and spend another day, a real long day, with me soon. Perhaps for the next hour it would be cooler in the garden than here. What do you think, Gerald! If we were to take out a book to the Pleasaunce, and you were to read to us. You are fond of poetry, Miss Lovell?"

Yes, Miss Lovell answered; not without a half smile, for the sense of the ludicrous was never far absent from Archie, and there was something in the idea of Gerald's sitting between them and reading—tender love-scenes perhaps—that, indignant as she was, struck her irresistibly. Then Gerald having stammered out something

incoherent about heat and shade, and very pleasant he was sure, if—if Miss Lovell liked it—Lucia ran away to get her garden-hat and parasol, and Miss Lovell and Gerald Durant found themselves alone.

Without hesitating a moment Archie took a purse from her pocket; drew out something neatly wrapped up in paper from amongst its contents, and walked up to Gerald's side. "Here is what I owe you, Mr. Durant. It is correct, I think—forty-two shillings and sixpence. I had it with me ready, thinking that possibly I might meet you here to-day."

Gerald started back from the little outstretched hand as if he had received a blow. "Miss Wilson! is it possible that you can wish to hurt me so deeply?" he exclaimed.

"I am Miss Wilson no longer, Mr. Durant," she answered, not without a ring of mournfulness in her voice. "I've never been Miss Wilson since the day I went with you to London. Papa's poverty and his debts made us live under a false name abroad, the name you knew me by. All that is over—not to be re-called, please. Papa is rector of Hatton, and I am Miss Lovell—a very different person in everything to Archie Wilson! Forty-two shillings and sixpence—you will find it quite right, I think? My travelling expenses from Morteville-sur-Mer to London and back, you remember."

And as Gerald still did not hold out his hand to receive it, she laid the money down on a little work-table that stood beside her, then walked back composedly to her place beside the window.

Gerald was cut to the very quick; but he was too much a man of the world to allow himself to remain

in a ridiculous position. Whatever became of the forty-two shillings and sixpence, Miss Durant's curiosity on the subject must certainly not be awakened by finding them there among her embroidery; and so, with the best grace he could, he forced himself to take the money up and put it in his pocket.

Archie's eyes triumphed as she watched him, and something so like the days of old (of a fortnight ago) was in their expression that Gerald in a moment found himself at her side, and with her hand, whether she would or no, clasped firm in his. "Miss Lovell—Archie, forgive me!" he exclaimed in his eager impulsive way. "You don't know what my life is—you don't know how hardly I am placed—how everything is forced upon me. To have to meet you as a stranger—to be treated as you have treated me now! can any punishment, can the worst punishment I deserve, be more than this?"

His face was flushed with emotion; his lips quivered! his eyes softened and filled with passionate eagerness as he looked at her. "Say one word—tell me you forgive me, and let everything between us be as it once was!" he pleaded, clasping her unwilling hand closer in his.

"Everything as it once was!" and Archie laughed: a hard little laugh that jarred on Gerald's heart. "What do you mean by 'as it once was,' Mr. Durant? Before I went with you to London, or—but that would be going back a very long time indeed—before the time when you were engaged to marry Miss Durant?"

"I am not talking of her at all," he exclaimed. "I

am talking only of you—asking only for your forgiveness. Will you give it me?”

“I don’t know what you mean by forgiveness,” said Archie. “I can never feel to you as I used, if you mean that. You told me when I said good-bye to you last I must leave all reckoning up of accounts until we met again, and then, if the balance was in your favour, pay you. I have paid you. Has anything more got to be said between us?”

Gerald dropped her hand in a moment, and stood silent: intently watching her face. “You will never feel for me as you used, Miss Lovell?” he said at last. “I am to take that as your final decision.”

“You may take it as you like,” she answered, quickly. “With me it is not a question of will. I could not care for you again if I tried, and I do not try.”

“Speak candidly. You detest me.”

“No, Mr. Durant, I do not.”

“What then?”

“I think you acted badly to me—badly, badly!” she broke forth, her eyes lighting up, as only blue eyes can light, with sudden passion. “When you could have saved me you did not! When a word of advice from you would have made me leave you and go home, you did not speak it! If I was placed so now,” she went on, bitterly, “I could save myself, I would want advice from no man; but then I was a little girl, a child, and I saw less harm in going on with you to London, than in landing alone at Calais. Tell me if what I say is true, Mr. Durant? Had I any save a child’s ideas, a child’s knowledge of the world, before that day I went with you to London? And now”—

her voice changing with one of the sudden pathetic modulations Gerald Durant knew so well—"what am I now?"

"Your position is changed," stammered Gerald, with a rising, a guilty sense of her meaning: for until this instant his own infidelity had been the worst offence with which his conscience, or his vanity, had charged him. "Your father being a clergyman, of course I mean——"

"And I mean nothing of all that!" she interrupted him, the light kindling more and more in the blue eyes that looked so unflinchingly into his. "I mean what am *I*, Archie, to myself, to papa, to every one else who cares for me? An impostor, Mr. Durant—just that. I was lucky enough to keep that journey of mine a secret, or nearly so, and as long as it remains a secret, every day, every hour of my life, is an acted falsehood. On the day when it becomes known—will you tell me, please, what I shall be then?"

"You will be always fairer and truer in my sight than any other woman living," said Gerald: but he faltered somewhat as he spoke, and his eyes sank. The situation was rapidly assuming dimensions now that placed it beyond the pleasant regions of covert, regretful, inconsequential love-making; and whatever he felt, and however sorry he might be, for the poor little girl, it was simply impossible for him, under the same roof with Lucia, to offer to marry her. "I think, upon my word I do, that you exaggerate the importance of a mere accident, Miss Lovell. No one was to blame—there is nothing that I can see to conceal——"

And Gerald Durant stopped with a start as the drawing-room door opened, and Miss Durant, equipped in a garden hat, a blue veil, and a parasol for her complexion, came up to his side.

"What book shall we take?" she asked, a great deal too taken up with the painful contrast that she felt existed between her own appearance and Miss Lovell's, to remark the expression of her lover's face. "Do you like Tennyson, Miss Lovell? Never read any of it? Fancy, Gerald, Miss Lovell has never read any of Tennyson. Then let us have something of his by all means. The 'Idylls of the King' is the most improving metre for reading aloud, Miss Barlow used to say."

And, neither Gerald nor Archie offering any opinion on the subject of metres, Miss Durant took up a book from her mother's writing-table; then with a condescending, encouraging little smile to the rector's daughter, put her hand on her arm and led her out into the garden; Mr. Durant, who fervently wished himself, or one at least of his companions, at the remotest corner of the earth just then, meekly following.

"You have not seen the Court before, Miss Lovell, I think?" said Lucia, stopping under the shade of the cedars, and turning Archie round to have the lions pointed out to her. "As you have lived so much abroad, I suppose you have never seen a house like this in your life. It was built in 1570 by one of Queen Elizabeth's courtiers, Hugh Durant. His arms, you see, together with those of his wife, Brune of Plumber, are sculptured in a cartouche shield on the pediment of the eastern front."

"Indeed!" answered Archie, putting on a look of

great interest, for the expression of Gerald's face had told her already what it cost him to listen to his poor pedantic little betrothed, and she was not insensible to a certain feeling of satisfaction in his pain. "What an old family the Durants must be, if you count back as far as Queen Elizabeth."

"Queen Elizabeth!" cried Lucia, with immense animation for her. "Do you call that old? Gerald, Miss Lovell says we must be an old family, because we can go back to the days of Queen Elizabeth. Why, an ancestor of ours, Geraldine de Durant, accompanied William the Conqueror to England, and in the reign of Edward I. we find that the family were already settled in this parish."

"Edward I.? But I thought Sir Hugh Durant built the house in 1570?" said Archie, with the air of one humbly seeking for information.

"Certainly," answered Lucia, "certainly. You are quite right as to date. This house was first built in 1570, but we have records to show that our family lived in the parish as early as the reign of Edward I. I must caution you, however, Miss Lovell," she added, "about using the title of 'Sir.' It was not until the year 1611, that my ancestor, Francis Durant, was made a baronet. He was the seventh gentleman on whom this honour was bestowed. During the civil wars of Charles I., Sir Francis Durant was distinguished by his loyalty, which he showed by giving nearly all his money and also his two sons' lives to the king. After the death of Charles, they say he was so mortified that he clothed himself in sackcloth, and, causing his grave to be dug some time before his death, laid himself

there every Friday morning, exercising himself in divine meditation and prayer."

And then Archie took another look at Gerald's face, and her heart softened towards him as it had never done since the moment when she first made the confession of her flight to Bettina. He had behaved cruelly to her: no doubt whatever about that; had all but won her heart—such a heart as she could have given! to pin upon his sleeve for a day; and through him and his selfish weakness the worst folly of her life, a folly whose consequences might darken all her future years, had been brought about. But he was to marry Miss Durant of Durant's Court. He was to spend the remainder of his days with a woman who talked of cartouche shields, and William the Conqueror, and ancestors in sackcloth; a woman who put on a blue veil for her complexion when she walked in her own garden; a woman, ten minutes of whose society seemed to weigh on Archie as no ten hours of her life had ever done before. And her heart softened to him. Bitter, hard, relentless as she had felt when she first heard his voice, first saw his arm around Lucia's waist, she softened to him now that she began to know Lucia herself. Whatever Gerald Durant's sins had been, his punishment, at least, would be an ample one.

"I wish I had your memory, Miss Durant. I never could remember anything, in prose, as long as what you have been telling me."

"It depends upon how one has been brought up," answered Lucia, complacently. "Travelling about, as you have, I dare say your studies have been interrupted; now, I had the same governess—Miss Barlow—for eleven years. From the very first Miss

Barlow made me learn the epistle, gospel, and collect every week, and as to the kings of England ——”

“Oh, Lucia, do let us go on,” interrupted Gerald, impatiently, and with a horrible dread that all the kings since the Conqueror, with a dozen or so collects and epistles, would be repeated for Archie’s amusement, and his own torture, on the spot. “It’s all very well for you, with a hat and veil and parasol, to stand in the broiling sun, but as I happen to have nothing on my head, and have no wish to experience a sun-stroke, I must really ask you to hurry—interesting though of course your descriptions are, Lucia dear,” he added, demurely.

And Miss Durant, who took every word in its most direct sense, and who was indeed too encased in the triple armour of self-esteem ever to suspect the existence of irony, smiled placidly at the compliment. Then, still affording historical and antiquarian information as they walked, led the way to the Pleasaunce or heath, an inclosure, which lay at the extreme verge of the Court gardens, and to which a vine-covered alley, cool even at noonday, led through the side grounds the entire distance from the house.

The Pleasaunce occupied about an acre of land—not the six acres which Bacon, with his royal disregard of space, directs. Saving in size, however, all the rules that the great philosopher laid down, had been adhered to by its original constructor, and strictly followed by all succeeding owners of Durant’s Court. There were the thickets of sweetbriar and honeysuckle, and wild vine amongst; and the ground was set with periwinkles, violets, primroses, and other such plants as prosper in the shade. There was “that good flower

to the eye, germander;" and sweetwilliam and red roses, and many other of the like low flowers, "that are, withal, sweet and sightly;" while further away from the garden, where the ground rose and fell with natural undulations, and where the neighbouring giants of the Chase gave densest shade, were thickets of holly and larch, of juniper, arbutus, and hawthorn.

Miss Durant after a good deal of deliberation—in one place suspecting a sunbeam, in another detecting an ant's nest, in another a draught—succeeded at last in finding a spot sheltered enough for her partially to raise her veil and dispense with the shade of her parasol; and seating herself here beneath a low-spreading, many-branched old hawthorn on the mossy turf, she signified graciously to the rector's daughter that she might take a place at her side.

"You are not as much afraid of the sun as I am, I see, Miss Lovell, but Miss Barlow always insisted on my taking great care of my complexion, and fair people really tan so dreadfully."

"They do," said Archie, taking off her hat and tossing it on the ground beside her, then running her fingers up through her bright untidy hair in what Miss Durant felt was a most reprehensibly boyish manner. "I was fair myself once. Yes, Miss Durant, nearly as fair as you, and see what I have tanned to! Burnt-sienna; neither more nor less."

"I dare say you are a little sunburnt," remarked Lucia, looking down pityingly at the girl's brown shapely hands; "but fair? I should hardly have thought, Miss Lovell, that you were ever very fair."

"Look above my wrists," said Archie, pushing back the sleeve of her linen dress so as to show a

modelled arm, absurdly white compared to the brown hands and sunburnt face. "Don't you think if I took great care, and wore a veil and gloves for two or three summers, I might be fair in time, Miss Durant?"

"You might grow fairer," said Lucia, circumspectly. "No doubt you might grow fairer; but I think never fair. Miss Barlow used to say that a skin once thoroughly deteriorated can never be restored to its pristine condition."

"That's bad for me," said Archie, shaking her head. "Mr. Durant," with a mocking look at Gerald, "what do you think? Would anything ever bring my copper-coloured hands and face to what they should be?"

Miss Durant actually opened her eyes at the audacity of the question. A young girl at her first introduction to a gentleman to mention such a subject as the skin of her own hands and face! It was indelicate: positively indelicate. "I think we had better get on with the reading, Gerald," she remarked primly, and while Gerald was looking, not speaking, his answer to Archie. "That is, if Miss Lovell cares to hear it. We shall not have time to get through one of the Idylls before luncheon unless you begin at once."

"As you like," said Gerald, reluctantly; for it seemed to him just now that to sit and watch Archie in this golden shade—yes, even with Lucia there too—was poetry sufficient. "The heat really makes one feel so lazy."

"Oh, please read," cried Miss Lovell, with well-acted eagerness; "please do not disappoint us. I am so very anxious to hear the Idylls." And she took the book from Lucia, handed it over to Gerald, then

composed herself with folded hands and preternatural gravity of face, to listen.

"The Idylls of the King" were about as unknown to this little outer barbarian as the tragedies of Æschylus would have been. An Idyll she imagined was probably a good deal like an elegy; as Miss Durant had selected the book, it was sure at all events to be improving and horribly dull; and, in the pass to which they had all come now, the best amusement going, perhaps, would be slyly to watch Gerald's face as he read, listen to Miss Durant's annotations, and occasionally offer ignorant remarks of her own the better to draw out the superior wisdom of her companions.

"You have no work with you, I see," remarked Lucia, as Gerald turned over the pages of the book, hesitating which of the four Idylls would be best suited to his audience; and as she spoke she drew out a neatly-pinned roll of embroidery from her pocket. "I always think it is such a waste of time to sit out of doors or listen to reading without working."

"But I can't work," said Archie, "except mending, and that I detest, and besides I'm not clever enough to do so many things at once. To be out of doors in such a place as this, and to listen to poetry at the same time, would be quite enough for me, particularly if the poetry was very well read and the subject very appropriate!"

And she gave a half-sigh and a little significant smile towards Gerald.

Both sigh and smile, as it chanced, were intercepted by Lucia, who on the instant scrutinised, with other eyes than she had yet done, her visitor's personal appearance. Fresh, delicate, refined, the girl looked,

with some quivering reflected light brightening into gold her waving chestnut hair, and with her blue eyes laughing under their black lashes, and the white teeth gleaming from the sunburnt face. And a prompt decision rose in Miss Durant's mind that Archie Lovell's visits should be very few and stately so long as Gerald was at the Court! Pretty she was not, nor graceful, nor well educated; but she had the sort of brusque manners, the sort of gipsy good-looks that might attract, by their mere oddity, a man so prone to be bored with everything to which he was accustomed as Gerald. And Lucia had no wish that he should be so attracted. The days of her generosity towards him were quite over, now that in her heart, and in her chilly little way, she was beginning to love him. The rector's daughter was not in the least prettier than she had thought; nay, there was something almost repellant in the juxtaposition of those blue eyes and that brown face now that you saw them close, only, only—instinctively, Lucia Durant already was afraid of her. How could she know what sort of ideas a girl brought up among foreigners might not have? how tell that these were not the manners of that horrible outer-artist world which, it is said in novels, young men do in their hearts prefer to all the accomplishments, all the graces, of refined female society?

“Read Elaine, Gerald, if you please. That is the Idyll I know that mamma would approve of most. Miss Lovell, don't you think you would hear better if you were to come and sit on this side of me? You cannot catch the meaning if you are too near to the reader.”

“No, thanks, I like to be where I am,” answered

Archie—Gerald had thrown himself almost at her feet on the turf—"I have just a little view through the trees of the Court, Miss Durant, and if I don't understand the reading I can look at that and think of all the histories you were so good as to tell me. Now, Mr. Durant, please. We are all attention."

"Elaine the fair, Elaine the loveable."

Gerald read, as he sang, with taste, with feeling; with an absence of artifice or seeking for effect that gave his reading the simple happy charm of the very highest art. After the first six lines, Archie's imagination had taken fire: at the end of two pages she was leaning forward, her eyes fixed on Gerald, her lips parted and tremulous; all the beauty of that marvellous poetry lighting up her childish face with rapt and eager attention.

"Are you so wise?—you were not once so wise."

Gerald's voice trembled ever so slightly as he read these first words of Launcelot's to the Queen; and for an instant he raised his eyes to Archie's face.

"I have lost my needle," said Miss Durant, with cold distinctness; "be kind enough, Gerald, to leave off reading till I have found it. Listen without working? No, indeed;" as Gerald, not without temper, suggested the alternative. "I should be very sorry to waste my morning in such a fashion, and as I've heard all the story before, I am really not so interested but that I can bear to leave off for a little. Miss Lovell, may I trouble you to rise?"

And as the searching for a needle among moss is an affair demanding time and patience, it was ten minutes, at least, before the reading proceeded.

"You seem quite excited, Miss Lovell," Lucia remarked, glancing at Archie's animated face as Gerald took up the book again. "You must be a great admirer of poetry, I should say."

"Of *that* poetry, yes," said Archie. "I never heard anything like it before. It touches me like music!"—clasping her hands with the un-English gesture, that to her was nature—"I could sit here and listen for hours."

A remark that naturally lent fresh tenderness to Gerald's voice (and filled Miss Durant's mind with renewed and stern determinations respecting the degree of intimacy to be observed with the rector's daughter) throughout all the remainder of the reading of Elaine.

When it was over, Lucia wondered what o'clock it was; then, having satisfied her curiosity by looking at her watch, asked Gerald if his throat felt dry; and finally remarked that she had embroidered a spray and a half while he read. These were Miss Durant's commentaries after hearing the noblest poetry, read by the voice she loved, in such a scene as this. But then, as she said, she had heard the story before.

"And you, Miss Lovell?" said Gerald, turning from Lucia to Archie; "what do you think of Elaine? She deserved a happier fate, did she not?"

"I don't know," answered Archie, with a sort of shyness on her face that Gerald had not been accustomed to see there. "I think, perhaps, to have loved Launcelot—and to die—was better than any common living for her. Would you mind, please, reading again the description of where she sees him first? I mean, after that line:—

"Won by the mellow voice before she looked."

"I thought you had a bad memory, Miss Lovell," Lucia interpolated; but Gerald, the blue eyes flattering him so pleasantly, turned back to the page and read the passage through without a word. What feeling but one could have called forth that shy, sweet blush, on the girlish face? For whom, save himself, could that feeling as yet have stirred in Archie Lovell's heart? He read it through to the concluding lines:—

"However marr'd, of more than twice her years,
Seam'd with an ancient sword-cut on the cheek,
And bruised and bronzed, she lifted up her eyes
And loved him with that love which was her doom."

"Bruised, and bronzed, and seamed," remarked Miss Durant, pinning up her embroidery, then carefully picking off every tiny morsel of dead moss or leaf from her dress, as she rose from the ground. "Well, I cannot say that Sir Launcelot would have been one of my heroes. It seems to me he only wants a broken front tooth, and a pair of high shoulders, to be exactly like old Major Seton of Ludbrooke."

"And it seems to me," said Gerald, somewhat indignantly, "that the story of that broken front tooth alone ought to make every woman in her heart think Major Seton a hero! A radical defect in your character, Lucia, is your incapacity for hero-worship."

"Oh, so you have told me before," said Miss Durant, placidly; "but really I never have been taught to see anything admirable in the mere bulldog sort of courage men possess in common with the lower animals. Fancy, Miss Lovell, once when the boys were at Eton together, Ralph Seton, a near neighbour of yours, and my two cousins — as they were all going through the town they saw some people, dreadful common people you

know, fighting, and Ralph Seton would insist upon taking part, and got a fall that nearly killed him, and one of his front teeth broken. Now, is there anything wonderfully heroic in the story?"

"Not told as you have told it, Lucia, certainly," said Gerald, curiously watching Archie's face meanwhile; "when you consider, however, that the 'dreadful common people' were a huge costermonger very nearly killing a woman, and that Ralph, a little lad of fourteen, rushed in single-handed to the rescue, it rather alters the case. I have often thought," added Gerald, with the easy generosity that sat so gracefully upon him, "that the characters of all three of us were well brought out upon that occasion. I showed an extraordinary amount of indignant emotion—amounting even to tears, I believe—but no more. Robert Dennison remarked, coolly, that every one probably was serving every one else richly right. Ralph, without a word, went straight to the front—"

"And got knocked to pieces for his pains," interrupted Lucia. "Well, I never did, and I never shall, see the beauty of that sort of thing—except of course in poetry. If people have to go through the world (where, as Miss Barlow used to say, two-thirds at least of success depend on appearance), what object *is* there in getting yourself disfigured by fighting for dirty wicked people you don't care about? What do you think, Miss Lovell?"

"I—I?" cried Archie; but with an effort that Gerald noticed keenly; "I think you are quite right, Miss Durant. The description of Sir Launcelot might be Ralph Seton's word for word, and I know that Ralph always was, and always will be, a hero to me.

What you and Mr. Durant have been saying now makes me like him a hundred times better—if that is possible—than I ever did before.” And she raised her face bravely, but blushing furiously still, full up to Gerald’s.

Their eyes met; and a new light broke suddenly upon the heart of each. On Archie flashed the truth that Ralph Seton ever since that first day in Morteville had been present in her thoughts; that she liked him, not indeed with a love to be her doom—for the passion of love was still a terra incognita to this heart of seventeen—but with a liking second only to the love she bore her father; a liking dimly akin to Elaine’s for Launcelot; a liking that put her fancy to Gerald and for the Russian prince and Willy Montacute very much upon the same level. On Mr. Durant was forced the conviction that the heart he had been playing fast and loose with, the only woman in whose society he had ever thought he would like to spend his life, was lost! His memory went back to every little scene in which Archie had ever seemed the nearest to loving him: the time when they stood upon the moonlit terrace by the sea, the time when she found herself alone with him on London Bridge, and he knew that her face, her voice, had never softened as they did now. Had they softened for the imaginary Launcelot only, or for Ralph Seton? Seton who, with all his fine qualities, Gerald had ever looked upon as a man altogether out of the world of love or youth? This was a detail over which, in the first angry flush of disappointment, he did not trouble himself to think. They had not softened for him. He might marry Lucia; listen to her songs; read aloud improving metres to her for the remainder of his

days; and Archie—with horrible sharpness the thought stung him—would be entirely unmoved by anything he did or thought or suffered. And up to a minute ago those blue eyes, those parted lips, those little clasped soft hands had befooled him still! He had seen love hidden under the coldness of her manner—love under the passionate reproaches with which she had met him—had read to her with veiled tenderness in every word, with furtive glances at her face—believing himself Sir Launcelot, and she Elaine or Guinevere, or both, as regarded the intensity, the hopelessness, of the regard she bore to him.

He very nearly hated Archie on the spot. Vanity was by far the strongest feeling Gerald Durant ever carried into any love affair; and when vanity, as now, received a death-stroke there needed very little more for his love to give one fierce blaze of disgust, then smoulder (three days generally saw the whole process out) into indifference. I spoke before of French proclivities in his nature: this was one of them. The best friend living to men—the least touchy, the least paltrily vain—it was next to impossible to him to act or feel very generously towards any woman who had omitted to be in love with him. It is not quite pleasant to record in black and white; but Gerald had such a charming way of making you see everything in his light, that you really thought none the worse of him for this or any other weakness when you were with him; and then how much must always be laid to the account of the school in which a man has been brought up! To Gerald, as to his compeers, a woman's heart was a stake to be won; the more up-hill the game, the greater number of odds against him, the more exciting the contest. Lost, his

own special amusement in the game over, and the bits of red and white bone with which a successful adversary has scored his tricks at *écarté* were scarcely, according to his creed, more fitting objects for a wise man's regret. You will nearly always observe this kind of optimist philosophy to prevail among the class of men who at once cultivate love as a pastime, and study it as a science.

"Dear old Ralph!" he cried, rising hastily from the ground, and not deigning to give another glance at Archie Lovell's face. "I can imagine any woman thinking him a hero, if he is like what he used to be in the days of old. Still, Lucia," his voice growing soft and tender as he turned to her, "I don't know that I wish to have you changed in anything."

"What! not in my incapacity for hero-worship, Gerald?"

Gerald's answer was a whisper that brought the colour to Miss Durant's cheeks; and then, with more little fond murmurs passing between them, he folded her muslin scarf round her shoulders, handed her her parasol, arranged her veil round her face, and offered to carry her work-basket to the house with most lover-like and demonstrative devotion.

"And how is it that you know Major Seton, Miss Lovell?" asked Lucia, as they were walking slowly back through the garden, and growing very much pleasanter in her tone now that Gerald's undivided attention had returned to herself. "I should not have thought you had had time yet to get acquainted even with any of your neighbours."

"Oh, we have not seen much of Major Seton here," answered Archie, turning aside her face; "he only re-

turned from Scotland the day before yesterday, and—and—has been round to see us three or four times since—but we knew him, years ago, when I was a child in Naples. He is more than a brother to me—he is papa's best friend," she added quickly, and with an intuitive feeling that Ralph was one of the people Miss Durant would be likely to disparage.

"Ah! that will be very pleasant for you, then, to live so near him. Major Seton is an excellent sort of person, I dare say, when you know him. We have only seen him once since his return from India, and mamma and I both thought his manners rough, but—"

"You did not understand him, I should think," broke in Archie, bluntly. "Ralph Seton rough! Why he is the kindest—the gentlest—" but here, chancing to meet Gerald's eyes again, she interrupted herself abruptly, stopped a moment, buried her hot face in a great branch of jessamine that hung down low across the path, and did not open her lips again till they reached the house.

"A strange unmannered kind of girl, Gerald," said Miss Durant, when some minutes later they had said good-by to Archie at the park-gates; for no persuasion could induce her to remain longer with the lovers. "But I don't know that there is anything really to dislike in her. How excited she got about the reading and old Major Seton! There must be something serious there, I should say, shouldn't you?"

"Really, Lucia, I don't know. I cannot say that I feel any special interest in the state of Miss Lovell's feelings."

"Ah! did you think her pretty then, Gerald, or was she like some one you have known, or what? for

I am sure you looked at her enough all the time you were in the Pleasaunce."

"She is like some one I have known," answered Gerald, "and I do not think the term 'pretty' is one I should apply to her. Will that do, Lucia?"

"I—I was afraid you did not care about her!" cried Miss Durant, looking radiant. "I mean I thought most likely you were a little bored by the poor thing—but I'm half afraid mamma will be vexed that we let her go so soon. Don't you think, now, we might ask her and Major Seton to spend the afternoon here to-morrow? If there is an attachment between them we ought to do our best to bring it about, and you know you want to see Major Seton. Croquet and high-tea upon the lawn would be pleasant, Gerald, eh?"

"Remarkably pleasant," answered Gerald, laconically, and watching the last flutter of Archie's summer dress behind the trees. "You are beginning to understand my tastes beautifully, Lucia."

"And"—after a minute's silence—"is the person Miss Lovell reminds you of some one you care about, Gerald? I won't ask you any more."

"Some one I care about? Well, my dear Lucia, I should think you could answer that question for yourself. Is Miss Lovell in the very slightest degree like you?"

Miss Durant, with pretty consciousness of the absurdity of the question, answered no, and was satisfied.

CHAPTER XI.

In the Second Column of "The Times."

A SOLITARY first-class passenger had alighted from the midday express that stopped by signal at Hatton; and, directed by the one porter the station possessed, was starting across the fields to Durant's Court just as Archie Lovell bade good-by to Gerald and Miss Durant at the park gates.

The sultry morning had softened into one of those silent mellow days in which English fields and woods and hedge-rows wear a pathos and a beauty all their own. A yellow sunshine, a smalt-blue heaven, seem ever somewhat of an anachronism in England. To-day, mid-August though it was, there was just that foreshadowing of change—that pallor in the sky, that haze across the reddening woods, that fitful freshness on the western wind—which gives our northern summers their peculiar charm; one which the glaring splendour of the south for ever lacks; the charm of evanescence and of frailty. The coarsest, the least sympathetic man could scarcely have walked untouched among the golden fields to-day; the fields that in another month: the sky paler, the distant woods more hectic: should be shorn and crisped by early frost—brief summer already in its grave! Even the stranger, ordinarily a much more interested observer of green cloth than of green fields, was moved into something near akin to genuine feeling, tender memories, as he went slowly and lingeringly upon his way.

How familiar and how strange the sights and smells of English fields, the babble even of the little meadow stream beside the path, seemed to him after all these dreary years of disuse! Years in which he had dissipated health, strength, energy—everything save the intolerable weight and tediousness of living: years in which he had played without excitement, drank without solace, roamed over the world without making a friend, and worked harder than many an honest man at his miserable vocation without at any time seeing more than a month's dinners ahead. What a ludicrous lottery it all was!—that ever-present burthen to the thoughts of unsuccessful men—manipulating a cigarette absently, then holding it unlit between the fingers of his delicately-gloved hand. His brother, without any capacity whatever for enjoyment, but simply because there chanced to be eighteen months difference in their ages, the possessor of two or three estates of pleasant English land like this; and he, a man who could have taken intense pleasure in his shooting and his fishing and his farming, an adventurer, a frequenter of foreign cafés, a picker-up of napoleons at cards, an intimate acquaintance of the police. Everything for which his nature did not fit him! How easy it was, he thought, for elder sons to keep right! If a nice little allotment—say, even, of eighty or a hundred acres of land like this—with a good house to live in, and an income to keep it up upon, were to be assigned to him now, how honourable and straight-walking a fellow he would be to the end of his days! Failing this—well, failing this, he must just remain what he was: the outcast younger son of an old race, Edward Randall, *alias* Colonel Vavasour, *alias* Captain De Vere, *alias* Jemmy

Waters; obliged by the fact of being human, to eat—by the fact of being disgraced, to earn his food as he could; and at the present moment employed on the kind of business which men even with no special pretensions to delicacy or honour would shrink from as from the last disgrace. The business of exacting hush-money out of a girl's fears, or of selling her secret to the highest bidder—her own father, or the Durants: this was simply a matter of detail—that he could find.

Captain Waters lit up his cigarette, and with a slow slouching step, very different to that airy one which he was wont to wear before watering-place spectators walked on, miserably meditating, a little perhaps on the ignominy of his own position, but a great deal more upon the injustice of the laws of primogeniture, in the direction of Durant's Court. At a sudden turn in the path, just where the stream to which he was mechanically listening still wound out of sight beneath a clump of alder bushes on the bank, he suddenly perceived a girl's figure approaching through a field of standing corn, not twenty yards ahead of him to the right. He stopped instantly, drew himself behind the shelter of the bushes, and watched her. It was Archie Lovell; dressed in a fresh linen suit, just as she used to be upon the Morteville sands, a bright flush upon her face, a great heap of wild flowers—field poppies, clematis, briony, dog-roses—in her arms. Prettier and more like a child than ever she looked, and altogether a picture, Captain Waters thought admiringly, as she approached, breast-high among the waves of barley, and with the misty woods for background, and the pallid, golden-grey sky above her head!

He waited until she was within five or six yards from the trees under whose shade he stood, then stepped quietly into the path, taking off his hat, as he pretended, with a start of surprise, first to recognise her. The blood rushed in a moment over the girl's face and neck. She gave a hurried look on all sides, as if for escape or help—a look whose significance was by no means lost upon Captain Waters.

"You are surprised to see me, Miss Lovell," he remarked, as in her very terror she stopped and offered him her hand; "and the surprise is mutual." He had had a letter three or four days before telling him of Mr. Lovell's departure from Morteville. "I had no idea that you were coming to England yet."

"We have been in England a week," stammered Archie, mortally terrified, yet with a half hope now that Captain Waters' appearance here might be unconnected with herself. "We had not meant to come so soon, but as the Rectory was standing empty, and there was nothing to keep us in Morteville—"

"Ah yes, very wise, I am sure," interrupted Waters, jauntily. "Very wise in any one not to stay a day longer than there was necessity for in that *gottverlassen* place. I got away earlier myself than I expected, and have been spending the last few days very pleasantly, very pleasantly indeed, with some of my people in town. I suppose you don't know if Gerald Durant is at the Court still, Miss Lovell? I could not find him in London, so came down here on the chance of seeing him."

"Yes, he is here," answered Archie, taking renewed heart of grace at the thorough unconcern of Captain Waters' tone. "I have been spending the morning

with Miss Durant," she added, "and am on my way home from the Court now."

"The Rectory is some distance off, is it not?" asked Waters, rather to gain time than because he had any interest in the parish topography. "About two miles from the Court—just a good walk—and you like Miss Durant? That is pleasant for you both; you will be nice neighbours for each other. No talk still of her being engaged to her cousin Gerald, I suppose?"

"Every talk of it, I should think," said Archie, stooping down and examining the petals of one of her wild roses. "It is all quite settled; indeed, Lady Durant has already invited us to the wedding in the autumn."

"And you believe that wedding will take place, Miss Lovell?"

"I—I—of course I believe it will," blushing hotly, at she scarcely knew what meaning in Waters' voice. "Why should it be broken off?" she asked, trying very unsuccessfully to smile and look unconcerned.

"Because—Miss Lovell, have you ever heard of Margaret Hall?"

She raised her eyes up with a sense of intense relief to Captain Waters' face. It was not to herself, then, not to her miserable secret—the secret that night and day never ceased to haunt her—that he was alluding! "I have heard the name, Captain Waters, and something of the story since we came here. But every one looks upon it as a thing of the past now. You know, of course, that Margaret Hall is dead?"

"Yes, Miss Lovell, I do. I know a good deal

more than I care to know in the matter; indeed, it is on business directly connected with it that I have come down to see Gerald Durant to-day. He is—well, I don't know that I need hesitate about telling you! If you had remained abroad I had hoped, sincerely hoped," said Waters, compassionately, "that nothing of all this would have reached your ears; but as you are here, so close to Gerald and to his people, you *must* hear of it before very long, and by warning you now, it seems to me that I shall be acting fairest by you both. Gerald Durant (unknown, I verily believe, to himself) is at present in a position of the most extreme danger with regard to this girl Margaret Hall's death, and perhaps—mind, I only say perhaps—it may be in your power to be his salvation."

The flowers fell in a heap at Archie's feet: she clasped her hands together eagerly. "Mr. Durant in danger, Captain Waters, and I be of service to him? I save him?"

"Well, I believe so, Miss Lovell. I may be wrong, of course, but I believe so!" He rested his forehead an instant on his hand, and an admirably well-acted expression, half of pain, half-bewilderment, came over his face. "The question is," he went on, after a minute, but looking away from her as he spoke, "would you do it?"

"Would I? Why, of course I would!" she cried, with a hearty readiness that, had Captain Waters been learned in any subject so delicate as the intricacies of a girl's heart, might have told him what kind of regard she really bore towards Gerald. "Tell me what I can do to help him, and I will do it in a moment, gladly."

"Well, that is generous of you, Miss Lovell, very:

but women are, I believe, extraordinarily generous always in these matters. Gerald Durant—really it's not an easy thing to speak about—is supposed, for reasons which you may perhaps guess, to have had an interest in the death of Margaret Hall. It took place on the night of the 2nd you know, and unless he can prove with extreme minuteness what he was doing at that time, I fancy things are likely to go pretty hard with him. Now, of course, any one who happened to be in his company on that night, might, if they chose, come forward and be of service to him. Do you understand me?"

"No, I do not," she answered, hoarsely, leaning her arm heavily against a stem of the overhanging alder, and with every tinge of colour dying on her face and lips. "I do not understand you. What do I know of this Margaret Hall, or of her death?"

"Nothing whatever, Miss Lovell. The question rather is, do you know anything of Mr. Durant and his actions on the night when her death took place?"

"Of course I do not. What right have you to question me? You are trying to frighten me still as you did in Morteville, and you will not succeed, sir! I will tell papa and—and another friend I have the whole truth, and they will protect me from you. I think you should be ashamed to persecute me so. What have I ever done to harm you?"

Captain Waters shrugged his shoulders, then calmly took out a folded newspaper from his pocket. "You spoke to me in this—well, I won't use harsh words, in this very impetuous spirit once before, Miss Lovell, and I bore you no ill will for it. I shall bear you none now. The whole affair, as I am going to show

you, is already in stronger hands than mine, and if you will take my advice you will keep your nerve, and above all your temper cool. As to consulting your friends," he added, "I should think it would be about the very best thing you could do. Read this, please." And he opened the paper, a copy of *The Times*, and pointing out an advertisement in the second column of the first sheet, put it pleasantly into her hands.

"INFORMATION WANTED.—The lady who lent a scarlet travelling cloak to another lady on board the excursion steamer *Lord of the Isles*, somewhere between Morteville-sur-Mer and London, on the 2nd instant, is earnestly requested to send her name and address immediately to the undersigned.—S. Wickham, Lilac Court, Inspector of the City district of Police."

As Archie Lovell read the advertisement—painfully, slowly read it, with burning eyes, with a brain that seemed incapable of taking in its meaning—Waters stood silent and scanned her face narrowly. His knowledge of the case, and of Archie Lovell's possible implication in it, was necessarily confined as yet to the most meagre outlines, Mr. Wickham being far too astute a general to betray the plan of his attack to an auxiliary save on that particular point at which his assistance was required. But long experience in the lower grades of human nature, long experience in the lower walk of intrigue—if only the intrigue brought into action in hunting down victims for the pharo or billiard table—had developed not a little quasi-professional acuteness in Captain Waters himself. During his first interview with Wickham, in spite of all his friend's flowery circumlocution, he had felt certain that legal evidence of some kind was wanted respecting Gerald Durant's actions on that second day of August

when he spoke to him from the Calais pier: certain, also, that the cause for which Mr. Wickham gave him a dinner and (for Oxford Street) excellent champagne, must be an urgent one. His story, such as it was, told; and Wickham had affected to treat the whole affair as a joke, dexterously changing the conversation to completely foreign subjects before they parted. But Captain Waters perfectly well knew that the eyes of Mr. Wickham and of his satellites had watched his comings and his goings ever since; and by dint of all kind of underhand research, joined to the vague hints thrown out by the newspapers, had succeeded in constructing a theory tolerably near the truth, as to the perilous position in which Gerald Durant stood; the kind of price that his own evidence, or opportune disappearance out of England, might hereafter command. Theories, unfortunately, however, not possessing any particular market value, the only course open to Captain Waters had, till yesterday, been to hold himself in readiness and play a waiting game. Then, suddenly the advertisement that he had read in *The Times* had given form and coherence to the whole shadowy chain of suspicion, which up to that moment his own brain alone had put together: had supplied him, too, with light as to the precise link in the evidence of which Wickham was at present in search. And on the instant Captain Waters decided to risk a first-class return-ticket to Staffordshire without delay. Into what market the knowledge of which he had to dispose should be brought: whether his price should be paid by Mr. Durant, in some Quixotic desire to save Miss Lovell, or by Miss Lovell, in some praiseworthy desire to save herself: Captain Waters, as I have said, cared little.

Only as selfishness was, he held, a sounder general basis to proceed upon than generosity; and as experience had shown him that women are more amenable to reason than men, in all cases of converting fear into money; it was as well, perhaps—this he thought now, as he stood watching the girl's terror-stricken face—that chance had thrown her, not Gerald Durant, first across his path.

"You look pale, Miss Lovell—take courage. The word 'police' is a formidable one, no doubt, to a young lady, but take courage. Everything may be hushed up yet."

"Do they know?" asked Archie, looking at him with frightened, dilated eyes, "do' these people—does the man who wrote this—know where I am now?"

The simplicity of the question made a half-smile stir under Captain Waters' little blonde moustache. "Know where you are! certainly not, my dear Miss Lovell. Do you think I should be talking to you in this informal way if anything was definitely known? I see that you are bewildered and shocked—now sit down on the bank—here in the shade"—she obeyed him mechanically—"and I will put it all before you as plainly and as briefly as I can: Mr. Gerald Durant some months ago was accused—wrongly, we will assume—of being Margaret Hall's lover, some have said her husband, and is now supposed to be implicated in some mysterious way in her death. Very well. A reward having been offered which has stimulated to the utmost the zeal of the police, inquiries have already gone so far that the whole matter is, I fear, certain to become public." She gave a start of terror at the word. "Mr. Gerald Durant will, in fact, be brought

before a magistrate to give some account of himself and of his actions on the night of the 2nd. And now you will understand what I meant by saying that any one who was with him at that time might possibly come forward and save him. If it could be proved that he was in another place and in other society at ten o'clock"—he paused a moment and looked steadily in her face—"the time when this young person (so unhappily for every one connected with her) ended her life, what, in law, is called an alibi would be established, and Mr. Durant would be free."

"And what have I to do with it!" she cried, passionately. "Why must I suffer? Why must I——"

"Miss Lovell," interrupted Waters, gravely, "these are not words that I ought to allow you to speak; these are not considerations for you to discuss with me. How you will act will be for your own future consideration. The duty which, meeting you suddenly now, it has seemed thrust upon me to fulfil is simply to warn you of the position in which you are likely to be placed, and I have done it! I have done more, Miss Lovell. My evidence has already been sought—well—by a detective officer; it would be false kindness to make too light of anything now—respecting the way in which Mr. Durant left Morteville, the companion with whom I saw him at the Calais pier; and remembering the promise that I made to you in Morteville, I have managed so far to screen you. When I saw this advertisement in last night's paper, I certainly thought it right to come down here, see Gerald, poor fellow! and offer such help as I could give him at once. But meeting *you*, Miss Lovell, has given another direction to my thoughts. Unless you bid me speak, I will remain

silent still; and then, as far as I can at present see, only your own free will—or—or Mr. Durant's—can bring you into the trial or before the public at all."

Into the trial—before the public! She, Archie Lovell, who yesterday, it seemed, took her doll to her pillow with her, brought forward to tell her own shameful story before men in a public court (she had been in the courts of law in Italy, and she remembered how the lawyers jibed and how the crowd hooted the witnesses); her father disgraced; Ralph Seton's love forfeited; every happiness of her life over—and for what? Because she must save Gerald, Miss Durant's promised husband, the man whose selfish weakness had alone led her into all this labyrinth of falsehood and of wrong.

The poor little girl was far at this moment from grasping anything like the true proportions of the danger that menaced her. Vaguely she remembered how, standing by Gerald's side, she had put her cloak around the miserable woman upon the bridge; vaguely realised that to save Gerald Durant from some mistaken suspicions that rested upon him, she would be brought forward and have to tell the story of her journey with him to London, and disgrace her father, and estrange Ralph, and all good men and women from her for ever.

"I thank you for what you have done, Captain Waters. Try to screen me still. Don't go to the Court—don't tell the Durants of this. Mr. Durant would not injure me, I think, even to help himself; but Lucia—Lady Durant—what would they care if he could be saved by our disgrace? Help me still. I have no

one to help me but you." And the childish white face that looked up to him imploringly touched even Captain Waters' heart with a sensation of pity.

"I will stand by you to the last, Miss Lovell. As far as a man of honour can"—the word came trippingly from his lips—"I will stand by you even when I am upon my oath. If you still wish to tell your father, I will come with you to him at once and——"

"No, no!" she interrupted, "not to him. He shall know nothing of all this as long as I am able to bear it alone." And then the thought of him, happy with his pictures and his poems at the Rectory, looking forward to fair years of peace and honour in his new home, overcame her, and with a convulsive sob she buried her face down between her hands.

Waters watched this outburst of emotion narrowly. Was she foolish, and vacillating, and a coward, like other women? he wondered, just as he had wondered that day upon the Morteville sands. A weak girl, who would say one thing to him and another to the next person who addressed her, and incapable alike of coming boldly forward to Gerald's rescue, or of dogged resolve in standing staunch to herself and leaving him to his fate. If she were made of materials like this, Waters thought, the sooner he gave her up and saw what was to be made out of Gerald Durant himself the better.

He was quickly re-assured of the kind of character this girl of seventeen possessed. That one convulsive sob was the first and last sign of her weakness. She kept her tears back bravely; steadied her brain resolutely to think; went through a moment's fierce combat with every impulse of her nobler nature; then suc-

cumbed and spoke. "I don't, of course, understand all this yet"—looking up to Waters with a face of marble, with tearless eyes, and hard-set lips—"but, whatever happens, I am determined in one thing. I will *not* hurt my father. I will *not* tell that story of my going to London to save any one. Mr. Durant must help himself, as I should have to do if I was in danger. Now you understand me. What return do you expect for befriending me, Captain Waters? Money? I can get it—tell me how much—and I can get it."

He shifted about somewhat uneasily, then, "it pained him inexpressibly, he said, to accept any assistance whatever from her, but he was horribly hard up just now, all this business might put him to a great deal of expense—travelling expenses, interviews, if requisite, with lawyers, and so on—and if, say, fifty pounds or so, could be forthcoming——?"

"You shall have what I can get," she interrupted him, sullenly. "I will beg from a friend I have, and what he gives me I shall send: no more. What is your address?"

He took out a card and gave it to her; remarking, delicately, that the sooner any little assistance she could render him was sent the better; then asked if he might attend her part of the way back to her father's house. "For," he added, taking out his watch, "I have quite decided now not to see Gerald Durant. My allegiance is to you, and to you alone, and if I return at once to the station I shall be just in time to catch the next fast train to London."

"Go, then," said Archie, without offering to leave her place, "I shall not return yet. I want to be alone."

"And you will have no ill-feeling towards me, Miss Lovell, because chance has made me the bearer of this disagreeable news?"

"Why should I? You are doing what you think best for yourself, I suppose, as I do—as all the world does!" And, just touching his outstretched hand with her death-cold fingers, she burst into a laugh: a hollow, odd-sounding laugh that even Captain Waters did not find it pleasant to listen to.

When he had walked away about half the length of the field he turned and saw her sitting still—the pale face blankly upturned, the motionless hands lying on her lap, just as he had left her. Captain Waters never more heartily wished that he was an elder son and free from the necessity of bread-winning than at this moment. Only, as money was to be made, and as he was obliged to make it, he was glad that he was able to do the girl a benefit, not an injury by his work. She was a woman worth working for and with, he thought; for—so unconquerably averse to the sense of our moral degradation are, we—even this man strove to whiten himself by saying that his victim's motives were very little higher than his own! Let her good name, her worldly reputation, be at stake, and, with all her soft girlishness of manner, she would save herself—even if the ruin of the man she loved yesterday were to be the price.

"And quite right too," Captain Waters decided, as he turned and went away. "What has this fellow, Gerald Durant, done to merit her generosity?"

Little did he think where, and under what circumstances, he would see the face of Archie Lovell next.

CHAPTER XII.

The Lull before the Storm.

LUDBROOKE, Major Seton's place, was about three-quarters of a mile distant from the Lovells' cottage, and before Ralph had been twenty-four hours at home, it seemed just as much a matter of course that his time should be passed with them as in the happy days of seven years ago at the Villa Andreo, in Genoa. The days when every morning Archie used to wait for him, a flower ready in her hand, all a child's delicious prodigality of love upon her lips, at the broken doorway of the old Italian garden: days when his only rival was Tino! when looking forward to the years to come, he was wont to feel the impossibility of Archie Lovell, among all the children of the world, ever deteriorating to the common standard of commonplace humanity as she grew up. She might not bloom for his wearing, of course; what was there in him to deserve a different fate to other men's? But, whether for him or for another, the frank nature *must* keep its frankness; the sweet lips their candour; the honest eyes their truth. All were foresworn now—and he was haunting her steps still: thrilling if only a fold of the girl's dress touched him as she passed; his pulse beating like a boy's whenever the blue eyes stole up to his; a spasm of hot jealousy contracting his heart every time that Gerald Durant's name passed her lips. And still steadfastly saying to himself that the passionate folly of his life was cured; that, following the voice of honour and

of prudence alike, he had put Archie Lovell away out of his heart!

He came to the Rectory soon after noon on the day succeeding Archie's visit to the Court, and found her alone in the garden that lay in front of the cottage, working with her own hands, and with a feverish sort of energy, at cutting up the turf of the little grass-plot for future flower-beds. She threw down her spade the moment she saw Major Seton, and running up to his side, said that she was tired and sick of work; then stole her hand under his arm and led him in, almost he thought with the unconscious warmth of old Italian days, to the house. The Rectory was a low-roofed, irregular cottage, all on the ground floor; one of those often added to country parsonages wherein more space is occupied by useless closets and passages leading nowhere, than by actual living rooms; but which, standing in its own upland garden and orchard, exposed to every wind that blew, seemed to Archie's gipsy instincts a far more congenial place to live in than Durant's Court—sequestered shade, stately cedars, and cartouche shields included. At the present moment every room, every passage of the cottage, was strewn with Mr. Lovell's newly-unpacked bric-à-brac—the thousand pounds' worth of toys that Ralph Seton's money had saved from the hammer. Dresden and Sèvres, Marqueterie and Buhl, met you whichever way you turned; and it was only by dint of much careful steerage that Archie brought Major Seton safely through to the little parlour, where the table was already spread for the Lovells' early dinner—luncheon, as Bettina, on the strength of new ecclesiastical dignities, insisted it should now be called.

"I have an invitation for this evening for you, Miss Lovell," said Ralph, taking a tiny note from his pocket after he had stood and watched the girl for three or four minutes, as his custom was, in silence. "It came enclosed in one to me, and I thought I might as well walk over at once and see what your answer would be. I called late last night to see you—to smoke a pipe, I mean, with your father—and Mrs. Lovell told me that she had sent you to your room, ill."

"Ill!" cried Archie, throwing off her hat with a laugh, and displaying cheeks like damask-roses, eyes that an unwonted light made brilliant. "I came back from my walk flushed, as I am now, and nothing would do for Bettina, but I must go off to my bed at once. If I look a shade more sunburnt than usual, papa and Bettina, or both, are sure to think I am dying. What is this invitation about? I didn't think that any one in Staffordshire, but you, knew our name as yet." And she took the note from Major Seton's hand, and standing close enough for him to look over with her if he chose, broke the seal, and read it through.

It was a prettily-worded invitation from Lucia Durant; every line mathematically equi-distanced, and with neat little commas and semicolons exactly where they ought to be, expressing Lady Durant's sorrow that Miss Lovell had not stayed to luncheon yesterday, and asking her to come over to croquet and high tea that evening. If Mr. and Mrs. Lovell would accompany her, Lady Durant would be charmed; if not, perhaps Major Seton would be Miss Lovell's escort, as they had written and asked him to join the party.

"Well," said Ralph, who had been reading, not the

note, but Archie's face, "do you care to go, or would the long walk be too much for you?"

"The long walk would not, for certain," she answered; "but—well, Major Seton, honestly, I don't think I am very fond of Durant's Court. Something seems to stifle me there, and then, you know, lovers are *not* amusing, are they? Gerald Durant was very well by himself, as a partner at a Morteville ball; with Miss Durant alone, I could find something to say perhaps about her trousseau, or the bridesmaids' dresses, but together—no! How can they want me? How can Mr. Durant want any other society than his cousin's?"

"Because he does not happen to care about her, I suppose," said Ralph, drily. "Theirs is an engagement without any pretence of sentiment, as I dare say you had occasion to guess, Archie, even during your short experience of Gerald Durant in Morteville. Miss Durant likes her cousin because she has never seen any one else in her life. Gerald marries her——"

"Because she is rich," interrupted Archie, quickly. "I know, and I repeat, I don't see why they ask me to be with them so much. If they are in love with each other, they cannot want strangers. If they are not——"

"If they are not, Archie?"

"Well, they certainly won't become so through having me in their company . . . besides, it's much pleasanter at home, and there is plenty to be done in the garden, if you'll help me. I don't at all see why you and I should trouble ourselves to make society for

the Durants, when we have the choice of remaining here alone by ourselves!"

But Bettina, who entered the room just then, on poor Mr. Lovell's arm, stately as if she had been a bishop's wife, for the one o'clock dinner, saw the matter in a very different light. An invitation, a first invitation to Durant's Court to be refused! The best neighbours they had: and showing such a friendly spirit—asking them already to the wedding—and everything! Some member of the family at all events should accept; and she had a very great mind to put on her mauve *moiré* and start, herself, as soon as luncheon was over: a threat that brought Archie, who shrank with nervous terror from the thought of Bettina and Gerald meeting, to instant, almost eager, submission. She would go; she would be agreeable to Lucia; would try, if she could, to behave like a young lady—not a boy; would accept any invitations they gave her: everything that Bettina wished—only, let her and Major Seton go alone. And then Mrs. Lovell happily remembering that the doctor's wife had promised to call and talk over parish business that afternoon, the matter was settled; and at three o'clock Archie stood ready by Major Seton's side at the Rectory-gate, with Bettina still calling out to her through the parlour-window, to be pleasant to everybody, and to accept all overtures of intimacy that Lady Durant and her daughter might be good enough to make.

The coolest summer path from the Rectory to Durant's Court was a footway that led through a corner of the Ludbrooke woods, then, after half a mile or so of steep and sheltered lane, fell into one of the side alleys of the old Chase; and this was the path Major

Seton chose for Archie now. She was in a tumult of wild spirits as soon as she got away out of Bettina's sight, and made the woods echo with her jokes and bursts of laughter as they walked along. But Ralph knew her well enough to detect a false ring in her voice, a bitterness very unlike her old self, under all her little jests, and his heart was pained for her exceedingly. More than ever the girl's beauty and grace, and fitful winning ways, had touched his fancy to-day: more than ever his reason bade him note how thorough, how consistent was her capacity for dissimulation: and more than ever he loved her! Loved her—so he strove to believe—with a love from which every selfish hope, every smaller jealousy, was absent. Whatever the nature of her feelings towards Gerald Durant: whether the last act in this part that she was playing should be comedy or tragedy: he, at least, would hold by her—blindly, unquestioningly! Not, perhaps, as a man would hold by the woman into whose hands he meant to entrust his own honour, but rather as a father would hold faithful to an erring child, a child whom no fault, no guilt, could ever estrange from his affection.

“You laugh too much, Archie; it pains me to hear it. I don't think there is quite a true sound in your voice or in your laugh to-day.”

They had just reached the point where Durant's Court was first visible among the distant trees, and Archie, in the middle of some wild childish jest or other, was laughing, a stranger would have said, with her whole heart, when Ralph spoke. She turned to him, and the laugh died in a moment: her lips began to quiver.

"I—I don't know what you mean, Major Seton. I never used to tire you by my nonsense once, I think!"

"It was all real then, Archie. If your voice had got its old sound I could listen to your laugh for ever."

"The old sound! How can one's voice remain the same always? Doesn't life change? isn't one changed oneself? I shall be eighteen in October. How can you expect me to be a child in anything?" Saying all this quickly, passionately, and with the same quiver yet about her lips.

"Well, you are not quite a child of course, Archie," said Ralph, kindly; "but you are of an age to have a child's spirits—certainly not to need to force them as you do to-day."

"You think so? Major Seton, what do you know of my life and of my troubles—the things I have to make my heart heavy? Is our age measured by years? Bettina and papa are ten times lighter-hearted, both of them, than I."

"Poor little Archie! If I could help you I would, child—help you with my life—but you won't let me, you know. I am nothing to you now. Do you remember the old motto that I taught you, and made you hold to when you were little—the motto that you acted upon when you saved Tino from being punished for your sins? Of course you don't, though. How should you remember anything that happened all those years ago?"

"I remember it distinctly," said Archie; "a very nice motto it was—for me and Tino! but it would never fit into the lives of grown-up men and women—

women especially: '*Fais ce que dois: advienne que pourra.*' A beautiful maxim! '*Fais ce que dois:*' easy to follow if other people did the same; but they don't; and one's life is mixed up with other lives, and what we do comes from other people, not from ourselves. If each of us lived in a desert, your motto would be an admirable one; but we don't live in deserts—I don't, at least—and I can't do what is right, and I care a great deal—sometimes I am told my first duty is to care—for what follows. *Allez!*'

She snatched off a great head of foxglove from the hedge, and began plucking it to pieces as she walked; throwing away flower after flower with a certain restless gesture of the hand that Ralph remembered was always the sign of some unusual emotion in her when she was a child.

"And I can't even advise you, Archie, then?" Never had he admired her more than at this moment: her fresh lips playing at scepticism and sophistry; the scoffing, defiant look upon her soft child's face. Never had she more recalled to him the days when he believed that the germ of every fair and noble quality was latent in Archie Lovell's heart. "There is nothing you will let me do for you?"

"In the way of advice, nothing. Advice never did me any good: it never will. Now, if—if—" she hesitated an instant; then shot a quick glance up into Ralph's face, "I hate to say this, Major Seton, when I think of all you have done for us, but I have no one to go to but you—I asked Bettina in a roundabout way this morning, and she told me we had not five pounds in the house—if you could lend me some money, fifty pounds say, you would help me infinitely!

help me, ah, so that I could never repay you while I live!" And she came close to him, and suddenly put up her hand, all in a tremble, on his arm.

The touch thrilled through every fibre of Ralph Seton's heart. "I wish you had asked me for anything else, Archie, by Heaven, I do! What do you want money for? Tell me everything you desire in the world, and let me—oh, child, let me have the foolish pleasure of giving it you—but money! You, at your age, to want money!" And for an instant the sickening suspicion that her father must have tutored her into asking this overcame him.

"Well, you have only to refuse me," said Archie, quietly; "but her face blanched at the thought of his refusal. "It is not to spend upon myself; it is not for anything I can tell papa about. I am in a great trouble—a trouble where only money can help me, and I thought perhaps you would have lent me some. I will speak of it no more, Ralph, dear Ralph!" half repentant, half cajoling, and looking up at him with eyes unused to denial, "you have sacrificed enough for us already, I am sure!"

And upon this Major Seton straightway did what many another stern, high-principled man would have done, perhaps, with a soft hand weighting his arm, blue eyes imploring to him through unshed tears—succumbed utterly; promised to write out a cheque for fifty pounds—a hundred pounds—whenever Archie wished; to ask her no question, direct or indirect, about the way in which it pleased her to spend it; but to stand—for this she pleaded to him wistfully—to stand by her and aid her in every difficulty of her life, now and always. Then he took her hand, and, raising it

reverently, held it long—poor little trembling hand that it was—to his lips. This was part of his system, doubtless, for his folly's cure: part of his system for putting the girl away out of his heart.

They found Lucia and Gerald already out on the lawn, pretending, in a lover-like fashion, to play croquet, when they arrived. Miss Durant, in her little affable way, assigned Archie and Major Seton to be partners at once; and the match was soon going on as gaily as though no heart out of the four were burthened by fear or jealousy—as calmly as though no storm, which might for ever wreck the lives of all, were already dark upon the horizon! Won by the irresistible frankness of Gerald's manner, the hearty grasp of his hand when they met, Ralph Seton found it impossible, after the first five minutes were over, to treat him either with coldness or distrust. Indeed, as the day wore on, and as he marked Gerald's thoroughly unconcerned manner towards Archie, his devotion to Lucia; marked, too—could he fail to mark?—the conscious blush that ever and anon rose upon Archie Lovell's face when, by chance, her eyes met his own; it began to dawn upon the mind of the old Moustache that a good many of his severest foregone resolutions were somewhat transcendental ones. Through folly or through accident, this girl and this man had once spent eight or ten hours of a summer's day—scarcely more than indifferent acquaintance spend at a pic-nic or a yachting party—together; and neither caring for the other, and the world happily knowing nothing of that foolish chance each with honour would marry and be happy apart, some day look back and speak with calmness of that accidental half-liking of the past. Archie had

spoken falsely to him in Morteville, certainly; ay—but how fair she looked, bareheaded beneath the cedar shade, the cool light playing on her white dress, her bright hair clustering round her neck, her slender figure girlishly, innocently free in every new attitude, as she flitted across the grass. She had been false—was false still. But something must ever be forgiven in what we love; and marvellously easy, it would be, he thought, to forgive her anything! And with an instinctive, a growing consciousness of why Major Seton watched her so steadfastly, Archie, all her forced spirits gone, was soft, quiet, womanly, as she had never been till to-day: soft and womanly to an extent that occasionally gave Gerald's heart a very sore pang yet; and even made Lucia confess to him, aside, that, with training and attention, and care of her complexion, the rector's daughter might possibly yet become "nice-looking than otherwise."

When their match was over, Major Seton and Archie shamefully defeated, high tea—as dinner, if eaten cold or at an earlier hour than usual, must now be called—was served to them upon the lawn. Archie sat by Sir John Durant, charming him, as that sunny face and laugh of hers always charmed old people, and long before the meal was over had begun to confess to herself that the air of Durant's Court, the presence even of the lovers themselves, no longer stifled her. A welcome sense of peace and protection came over her as she looked at Sir John and Lady Durant, at the stately old house, the hemmed-in gardens, the grave grey-headed butler standing erect and impassive behind his master's chair. Impossible, she thought, that vulgar, noisy trouble, the scandal of a public exposure,

could be coming near a place so sheltered, near people so separated from the outer world as these. What was there to prove that Captain Waters' story had a word of truth in it! Might he not himself have put that notice in the paper? Would such a man hesitate as to means where money was to be extorted? And she had been weak, cowardly enough to take all his threats at their full worth! Lucky that it had been out of her power to send him off the money at once. She would make fullest confession, she thought, as she walked home with Ralph to-night; would throw herself upon his pity; ask him to save her from the possibility of Captain Waters' further persecution; and then—then bright vistas of a peaceful future floated, rose-coloured, before Archie's mind! Her father happy with his pictures, Bettina with the parish, and she and Ralph fast friends, not a shadow of distrust between them, and in time, perhaps, long after Gerald and Lucia were married——

At this point of her meditation—Ralph was watching her downcast face just then, thinking how pure, how childlike, how untainted by a touch of falsehood, that face was—one of the underservants of the Court came across the lawn from the house, and, beckoning the butler mysteriously aside, said a few words in his ear. The old man at first shook his head, as though protesting against the indecorum of the message, whatever it was, that had been delivered to him; then, after a minute's consultation, returned behind his master's chair, and bending low, told him, in a whisper, that a person from London desired to see him without delay—a person on most important business, of the name of Wickham.

The word, whispered though it was, fell full on Archie Lovell's ear. Another instant, and her face—that innocent face that Ralph was watching so tenderly—had grown white as ashes.

CHAPTER XIII.

Farewells to Lucia.

MR. WICKHAM stood quietly waiting for the servant's return in the great hall of the Court; and as he waited he took a brief mental inventory of all the different objects by which he was surrounded. The dark groined roof—not used to shelter men of his particular class—the armour in which the Durants of old had tilted, and sometimes bled to death for honour; the coats of arms upon the painted windows; the glimpse through the open door of the garden, lying peaceful in the rosy evening flush, and of the little party beneath the cedars, Mr. Wickham took note of all: professionally, mechanically, with a view to possible contingencies, without any sense of triumph or of pity; simply as he would have taken note of the squalid furniture in that waterside tavern to which he conducted Mrs. Sherborne on the day succeeding Margaret Hall's death.

Sir John Durant would see him in a few minutes, the servant brought in word; Sir John was at present finishing dinner with some friends on the lawn, if the gentleman would walk into the library? So into the library, with his peculiar, stealthy, noiseless tread, the gentleman walked (taking more notes on his way); and there, upright, unmoved, just as it chanced under the mournful-eyed portrait of Sir Francis Durant—the cavalier who was wont to lay himself in his coffin in memory of the martyred king—stood and waited for

the present master of the Court: the old man whose pride, whose name, it was his mission to bring lower than the pride, the name, of any Durant since the Conquest had ever yet been brought!

Sir John came in with his accustomed courteous, blandly-condescending air; seated himself by the open window, from whence he could still see Gerald at Lucia's side, and signed graciously to Mr. Wickham that he might take a chair.

"You have come to see me on business, Mr. ——?"

"Wickham, Sir John Durant. Inspector Wickham," put in the visitor, deferentially, and remaining standing still.

"Mr. Wickham—ah, yes, I did not quite catch the name. Some communication from Conyers Brothers, of Lincoln's Inn, I suppose?"

Mr. Wickham gave an apologetic half-cough, and raised the back of his hand to his mouth. "Mr. Conyers was the party, I understand, Sir John Durant, who first opened your offer to our people, but my business is not connected with that in any way—payment of course never being made in these cases until the information sought for has been brought to proof. I have come down to-day on a mission of a remarkably grave nature, and—the circumstances being unusually delicate ones—it seems to me a duty"—on the strength of addressing a baronet, Mr. Wickham made his sentences as long and as inverted as he could—"a painful duty, Sir John Durant, to put you in possession of some of the leading facts my inquiries have brought to light before proceeding to execute it."

"Ah, yes, I'm much obliged to you for your attention, I am sure." And Sir John, always sleepy after

dinner, gave a half-yawn as he spoke. "If you really *don't* think Conyers would have done as well? I have a great dislike to business, and—and all painful subjects, and I am sure I shall gladly pay the hundred pounds (something has been discovered you say?) to know that the thing is set at rest. It has been a very harassing occurrence to me, Mr. Wickham, very." And Sir John drew out his spectacles, wiped them, adjusted them on his nose, and looked imploringly at his visitor, as much as to say, "Pray be brief, my good Mr. Wickham; you are an excellent person, no doubt, and have done everything that excellent persons of your class are usually paid to do in these matters, and I'm ready to glance at any distressing documents you may have with you, or sign you a cheque: anything to get rid of you, and of all other unpleasant subjects as briefly as possible!" And Mr. Wickham, no bad interpreter of expression, saw at a glance with what kind of human creature he had to deal. Durant's Court was not the only old house with an unsullied name and an ancestry dating back to William the Conqueror into which his professional duties had been the means of bringing him.

"I am sorry, Sir John Durant—ahem! very sorry—to say that my communication cannot be told in six words. This is a matter of no common importance, sir, and I think perhaps it would be as well to have a third party present during our conversation."

Sir John bowed resignedly. "Whatever you think necessary—only, really, if Conyers *could* have done it all—and another person present, you say! Now is that necessary, Mr. Wickham? It was my duty of course to see that these inquiries were made—a very

good girl, poor thing! the Sherbornes most respected tenants of ours for generations past—and it has been your duty to make them—but why should we pain another person by compelling him to listen to any of the harrowing details you have collected? Why should we, Mr. Wickham?”

“Well, Sir John Durant,” answered Mr. Wickham, with a little abrupt shift from his upright posture. “You being, as I hear, a magistrate, don’t need to be told that there’s a form in all these things—a form that it’s just as well to attend to. I’m placed by my duty in a position where it’s best for all parties to be plain spoken, and I hope you’ll say hereafter I conducted everything honourable and above-board. Mr. Gerald Durant is, I believe, staying in this house? Well, I understood so—I understood so—and if I may make so free as to offer an opinion, I should say that Mr. Gerald Durant is the gentleman who ought to be present at our conversation.”

“Dear me—well, now, I cannot see that!” cried Sir John. “What earthly difference can it make whether two people or one has to bore himself—I beg your pardon, to go through all this very distressing business?—however, of course you know best. May I ask you to have the goodness to touch that bell?—thank you, I have been rather helpless, Mr. Wickham, since my last attack of gout, and I feel every change in the weather. We are going to have rain now, I’m afraid. The harvest has been getting on very well hitherto.” Making these little remarks in the affably familiar tone he always employed towards his inferiors. “A great deal is in round us already, and we are not generally an early county.”

Mr. Wickham was deferentially interested. Being a Londoner himself he was not much of a hand at such things, but seemed to think the crops looked forward, certainly, as he came down by the train. After this, a servant having meanwhile entered and been told to request Mr. Gerald Durant's presence in the library, there was a pause. Sir John helped himself to a pinch of snuff from his gold snuff-box, and turned his face again towards the window (very handsome the kindly weak old face looked in the sinking light); Mr. Wickham stood respectfully in the background still: the hard features immovable, expressionless as ever: the keen eyes adding more and more items to that professional inventory which his unresting brain was never wearied of drawing out. In five or six minutes' time Gerald Durant entered the room.

"Here is my nephew, Mr. Gerald Durant," said Sir John. "Gerald, this is Mr. Wickham—Inspector Wickham, you know, whom Conyers got to inquire about poor Maggie Hall, and we thought you might as well be present to hear how it is all settled. I wrote to Conyers a week or two back—didn't I tell you?—offering a reward if anything could be discovered about the way she came by her death, poor soul, and——"

But the old man's hazy talk was brought to a sudden stop before the look of Gerald's face. He had, I have said before, a complexion which flushed and faded like a girl's under any strong emotion; at this moment the blood rushed violently to his temples, then ebbed away and left him a pale ashen hue, very painful to witness. "You—you offered a reward, sir!" he exclaimed, his voice shaken with agitation; for now that the police had been at work, could he doubt *what*

story he had been summoned here to listen to? could he doubt that the shame of Robert Dennison's marriage—the treble shame of his having deserted his wife, was to become public? “No, you did not tell me of this before. I wish to heaven you had!” he added bitterly.

Up to this moment he had scarcely noticed Wickham, who was still keeping respectfully aloof in the background; as he turned impatiently from his uncle now, his eyes fell full upon the detective's face, and then Mr. Wickham came half a step forward, and after giving another of his small coughs of apology spoke:

“My duty is a painful one, Mr. Gerald Durant, but I wish to discharge it as delicately and as fairly as possible, and I warn you, sir, that anything you say now may hereafter be brought up to your detriment. I have no wish—there is no necessity,” he added with emphasis, “for me to employ subterfuge of any kind. I am an officer of detective police. I have been employed by the authorities to investigate the circumstances connected with Margaret Hall's death, on the second instant, and I warn you again, Mr. Durant, that anything you now say may hereafter be made use of to your disadvantage.”

“And why the deuce, sir, should we require this, or any other warning of yours?” cried Gerald, hotly. “Sir John Durant has offered a sum of money for the discovery of certain circumstances. You, it appears, have discovered them, and have come to claim your reward. What can we possibly have to say at all in such a matter? You have to speak, and we to listen, I think, sir.” And drawing up a chair, Gerald took his place at Sir John Durant's side. Only too clearly

he foresaw the cruel blow the chivalrous old man was about to receive; and his blood rose at the thought that already a man like this was treating them half with pity; warning them to say nothing that could hereafter be used against themselves! They, the Durants of Durant, warned not to betray their complicity with the guilty husband and betrayer—their own flesh and blood—of Margaret Hall the dairy-maid!

“I made use of a form only,” said Wickham, suavely—accurately calculating, meanwhile, the precise angle which Gerald occupied between the window and the spot where he himself stood. “There is, as Mr. Gerald Durant says, no necessity for the warning in this particular instance, but there are formulas that we are instructed to follow in every case of ar—of criminal procedure, and I adhered to duty in giving it. I have now, Sir John Durant, to lay before you briefly the results of my search in this matter. If they lead to a most unlooked-for conclusion, if they fix the guilt upon parties the least suspected by yourself, you will, I hope, be in some measure prepared for the shock. I have been placed in positions of this kind before—often before,” said Mr. Wickham, with honourable pride; “and I have always found, if I may be excused the remark, that the higher born a gentleman is, the better he bears any painful or unexpected disclosure; even a disclosure,” lowering and concentrating his voice, and moving a stealthy step or two in advance, “that may darkly affect his honour and the honour of his family.”

Gerald passed his hand with irrepressible impatience

across his face: old Sir John gave a puzzled benign look of inquiry at Wickham.

"This extreme delicacy does you credit, Mr. Wickham, still I cannot but think you over-estimate our interest in the case. The girl was a good girl, poor thing! the servant of one of my tenant-farmers, you understand—nothing more."

Mr. Wickham bowed; and looking down, traced out, for a second or two, one of the patterns on the carpet with his foot. He felt as assured now of the old man's utter ignorance as of Gerald's guilt, and it seemed to him that the shortest way of finishing what he had come to accomplish would be the most merciful; he also wanted to return by the seven-forty train to London.

"On the night of the second instant, Sir John Durant"—taking a note-book from his pocket, and occasionally glancing at it, but more for form's sake than because his memory required artificial aid as he spoke—"the body of a woman was, as you know, found in the Thames, a little below London Bridge. From the first, and although nothing material was brought to light at the inquest, some suspicions of foul play were entertained among our people, and I was entrusted with the further management of the case. It has proved as difficult a one, sir, as was ever worked; but no stone has been left unturned—although I say so—in working it; and bit by bit, as I am about to show, every portion of the requisite evidence has come into my hands. The story, shortly put, comes to this: Margaret Hall, seven months ago, eloped from her employer's house, here in Staffordshire, with a gentleman (whom at present I need not name), and, to the best

of my belief, though of this I have no absolute proof, became his wife." Gerald gave a sigh of relief. Discovery had not, after all, gone so far, perhaps, as he had dreaded. "On the second of August, Sir John Durant, this gentleman returned from France, accompanied by a lady—we may say, for shortness, by his wife—and arrived with her in town, as I have evidence to show, at about eight o'clock in the evening. They came direct from Morteville-sur-Mer to London, and the name of the excursion steamer that brought them was the Lord of the Isles. A man called Randall, better known among our people by the name of Waters, saw them on board together from the Calais pier; the gentleman's own servant, reluctantly, as is natural, is witness to the same; and, lastly, a lady who was one of their fellow-passengers swears to a travelling cloak she lent the young woman in the course of the voyage, and which, in the hurry of landing, or some other cause, was not returned to its owner. Well, sir, the gentleman (whom at present I need not call by name) was next seen with his companion by one of our officers on London Bridge, at a few minutes before ten o'clock that night; and here, as throughout, not a shadow of doubt rests upon the accuracy of the evidence, the officer, under my directions, having watched the gentleman at his town lodgings, not three days ago, and sworn positively to his identity. The girl was at this time dressed, it is remembered, in a scarlet travelling cloak; the gentleman was standing, no hat on, and his coat torn, by her side. Whether a quarrel had taken place between them already is a matter of surmise. There had been a disturbance shortly before on the bridge, which, it is suggested, may account for the

state of the gentleman's dress. Something unusual, at all events, about their appearance and manner made the officer watch them narrowly before proceeding on his beat. It was now, you will remark, near upon ten o'clock; a quarter of an hour only before the time when a woman's shriek was heard, and a body seen to fall from the bridge. An hour or so later, the gentleman went alone to the house of a relation, excited in manner, and disordered in his dress, and when joked with about his appearance, volunteered the singular statement that he had seen the ghost of an old friend's face — 'the ghost of a Staffordshire face' — on London Bridge that night. Some hours afterwards the body of a female was found drowned in the river, dressed in the scarlet cloak since identified, a handkerchief marked with initials corresponding to the name of the suspected party in her breast. The body was recognised and sworn to by Martha Sherborne, on the afternoon of the inquest, as that of her late dairy servant, Margaret Hall." And here Mr. Wickham paused.

"And what does all this prove?" cried Sir John, a nervous tremor in his voice. "I am a magistrate, Mr. Wickham, I understand law myself, and I don't see that these facts, supposing them all to be established, go to prove that the girl came by her death unfairly. If they point to anything, it is to what we have suspected from the first—suicide."

"That is a question for the lawyers," answered Wickham, with excessive gravity. "I make no accusation, I seek to establish nothing. My duty has been to search for facts alone. These facts having been considered conclusive, a warrant has been granted for the apprehension of the person who was Margaret Hall's

companion on the night of her death, and my duty here is to carry that warrant into effect."

"Here!" exclaimed old Sir John, a deep red flushing over his face as he got up slowly from his chair. "You are misinformed, Mr. Wickham, or you are carrying some mistaken sense of duty too far. What apprehension can you possibly have to execute in my house?"

"I have to arrest the person of Margaret Hall's companion," said Wickham, with increasing firmness, and producing a paper from his pocket. "You are a magistrate, Sir John Durant, and I look to you to help rather than hinder me in my duty—painful though it may be?"

"And that person?" faltered Sir John, with whitening lips, as a new and awful suspicion overcame him.

"That person," answered Wickham, "is now, I regret to say, before you. Mr. Durant," coming across the room in a second, and laying a heavy hand on Gerald's shoulder, "I arrest you on the charge of having caused, or been party to, the death of Margaret Hall, on the night of August the second. You must consider yourself my prisoner, sir, and you will be pleased to accompany me back to London by the seven-forty train to-night."

Gerald had been sitting till this minute with his hands tightly pressed across his eyes. He started to his feet in a second at Wickham's touch, and as his hand dropped from his face, both of the men who were watching him felt literally startled by the calmness of its expression. I imagine most innocent men or women would look to the full as guilty as really criminal

ones in the first stunned moment of an unjust accusation; guilty or innocent, the majority of human cheeks would certainly blanch—the majority of human nerves falter at such a moment as this! But Gerald Durant's face kept just as calm as it had been half an hour before, when he was whispering soft nothings to Lucia under the cedar-trees on the lawn. "Blood tells," thought Wickham, proud of the verification of his theory. "Evidence enough against him to hang a bishop, and he ups after his arrest, as cool as a cucumber, and with a face like this. Fine family—fine spirit! Pleasure to a man to have his duty lie with real gentleman who can act as such!" And possibly Mr. Wickham was right. Possibly it *was* his blood, the inherited instincts of a gentle race, that upheld Gerald at this moment. Robert Dennison, the manufacturer's son, could confront personal danger with the strength, the sheer animal courage, of a lion. Gerald could do more: he could confront disgrace sooner than betray a trust: could confront it with the carelessness of a cavalier dying for his worthless king, the grace of a French marquis arranging his necktie, and smiling adieux to his friends, upon his way to the tumbril! As Wickham told his story—from the moment when the word Morteville first turned suspicion aside from Robert to the last—Gerald had followed him calmly and minutely, his quick imagination supplying a hundred links that in Wickham's purposely short account were wanting; and, long before the heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder, had realized the position in which he stood, the very plain and straightforward path that lay before him. To whatever pass this extraordinary chain of accidents might lead, a double trust must, he

felt, seal his lips from speaking one solitary word of self-defence. By disclosing what he knew of Robert's marriage, he might possibly clear himself—and present to the world the chivalrous spectacle of a Durant striving to shift danger from his own shoulders to that of another member of his family. By bringing forward Archie Lovell he could, for very certain, reduce the whole accusation to an absurdity: save his own at the price of a woman's reputation. And the temptation, the conflict, that might have assailed many a man, equally honest, but of different race, never really for a moment came near Gerald Durant. He was placed awkwardly—simply that: and before his uncle, and before this man whose heavy hand was on his shoulder alike, must give not a sign, say not a word, that could by possibility criminate the two persons his honour bade him shield. How things would probably end as regarded himself was a speculation he did not enter upon. To be the hero of a melodrama might yield him, if the play did not last too long, a new emotion or two at all events; and as to coming to definite grief—well, as he had told Robert, no one ever finally does that in these days off the boards of the Adelphi.

"Seven-forty;" taking out his watch, quietly. "I think it would be rather a mistake to go by that, Mr. Wickham. The seven-forty is a slow train. If we go by the mail, which leaves Hatton at eight, we shall get to town an hour earlier, and I shall be able to have a cup of coffee and a cigar—you want something too, perhaps, after your journey?—before we start."

For about the first time in his long official experience, Mr. Wickham felt actually taken aback by his prisoner's unconcerned and courteous manner. He

required no refreshment for himself, but Mr. Durant was doubtless right; the mail would be the best train for them to go by, and he wished to make everything comfortable, and let Mr. Durant take leave of his friends—though generally best avoided—before they left.

Then Gerald turned to his uncle who was standing by, too stunned as yet to speak, and with his fine old face white to the very lips with agitation. "A ridiculous mistake, sir, is it not? but four-and-twenty hours will set it all to rights. You can come up to-morrow and we'll see Conyers together, and for to-night I think it would be wise to keep silence about it in the house. Say I have had to go up to town on business, nothing more."

"But—the thing is monstrous!" exclaimed Sir John, recovering his breath at last. "You—Gerald—accused of . . . why, good God!" he broke out passionately, "the very suspicion is a disgrace! Explain it away at once—explain at once to this officer how he is mistaken—say what you were doing at the time when the woman came by her death. The thing is a joke, of course it will prove to be a joke—you take it in the right way, Gerald—but don't let it be carried any further. If this officer's duty is to take you to London, you must of course go; but show at once before him, and before me, the ludicrous impossibility of your even being mixed up in such a charge." And with very poor success the old man tried to laugh, then turned abruptly aside and hid away his face between his hands.

"If I was to give an opinion," put in Mr. Wickham, with extreme politeness, "I should say that the

less Mr. Gerald Durant states about himself before me just now the better. If a gentleman, circumstanced as Mr. Durant is, was as innocent as the babe unborn, and as able to prove an alibi as I am to prove I am standing here, Sir John Durant, I should observe to a gentleman so circumstanced, 'the less you say before me, except in the ways of general conversation, the better.' These things are forms, certainly," added Mr. Wickham, "but forms are forms—and justice is justice—and what I say to Mr. Gerald Durant is, that every word he makes use of now it will be my duty to bring up against him in the course of examination hereafter."

"And you are quite right, Mr. Wickham," said Gerald, quickly. "I see now why you warned me before not to speak. The arrest itself is palpably absurd, but you have performed your part in it with honesty. You will have no objection, I suppose, to my speaking a few words in private to my uncle?"

"None in life, Mr. Durant, none in life. I wish to put you and all the family to no more inconvenience than necessary." And having previously satisfied himself as to the height of the window from the ground, Mr. Wickham retired to the door, turned aside, and took out his notebook; and Gerald was left to whisper whatever counsel or consolation he could find to give to his uncle.

He said very few words, and all with a smile upon his face, all with a manner of calm, of thorough assurance as to the whole thing being an absurd and insignificant kind of practical joke. "You will come up to-morrow morning, sir, bring Seton with you if he will

come, and see Conyers at once, though I hardly think it likely we shall want a lawyer's help at all. For the present the best way is for you to return quietly to the party in the garden, and let nothing whatever be known in the house about my arrest. If Lucia and her mother insist upon having suspicions, let them think I am in one of my usual difficulties about money. Women are not generally very difficult to blind in such matters. I won't even see Lucia before I go, sir; I couldn't, poor child! I'll see that little friend of hers, Miss Lovell—girls are the best ambassadors in each other's affairs—and entrust her with my farewells, if you can contrive to let me speak to her here alone? Lucky I left that rascal, Bennet, in town; he can bring my things from my lodgings to-morrow, supposing, which is very unlikely, that I am to be kept in durance over another day."

"And you won't see Lucia before you go, Gerald? Isn't this an over-delicacy of feeling; won't the child herself think it hard?"

"I *could* not see her," said Gerald, hastily, and turning his face away from his uncle's eyes. "Can't you understand, sir, that I would not have her, of all others, look upon me in such company as this?" glancing for a second towards Mr. Wickham's immovable figure. "When everything is over, Lucia and I will laugh at it all together, but now—no, I could not see my poor little cousin now! I'll send my farewells to her, as I said, by the parson's daughter, if you can manage for me to speak to her here alone,—afterwards, when I have had a cup of coffee, I can just get quietly away with my friend here, and later in the evening you will tell them all that I am gone."

He stretched out his hand, and poor Sir John, too stupified by the suddenness of all that had happened to do more than obey, took and held it silently within his own: then, with a heavy heart (Mr. Wickham opening the door for him as he passed) the old man stole out into the garden, and after parrying the questions of Lady Durant and Lucia as to the cause of Gerald's absence, made some excuse for asking the rector's daughter to walk with him towards the house. Five minutes later, with sinking limbs, with her breath coming awfully, guiltily fast, Archie Lovell entered the library, where Gerald, a cup of coffee in his hand, stood waiting for her in the embrasure of the farthest window; Mr. Wickham upright and motionless, but keeping stealthy watch over every movement his prisoner made, at his post still beside the door.

The poor little girl began to cross the room with faltering uncertain steps, and Gerald, seeing her hesitation, came forward kindly, took her hand in his, and led her to the window, where he had been standing. All coldness, all small animosity towards Archie had died in his heart during the moment when he first realized the new position in which they stood to each other, the danger into which through his agency she was about to be brought. Miss Lovell, the coquette, whose blue eyes, whose clasped hands, had cost his vanity so dear, was gone: and in her place stood Archie Wilson—the child who had chattered to him in the moonlight, the bright-haired little queen of the Morteville ball, the girl whose fair fame, unless he stood staunch to her now, might through his fault and for ever, be forfeited. For the first time in his life he felt as simply, frankly generous towards a woman as he

would have felt had she been a man. Neither a prey to be run down nor a toy to be forgotten (Gerald's broad classification, generally), did Archie seem to him now; but a friend, a comrade—the *bon garçon* participator in a madcap freak, of which he, as the guiltier of the two, must bear the punishment.

"Archie, how kind of you! but I thought you would come. You were always kind to me—kinder far than I deserved!"

He spoke to her just in the tone of their happy Morteville intimacy; as though their last cold meeting, as though his engagement to Lucia had never been; and every pulse of Archie's heart vibrated at his voice. "I don't know what great kindness there is in walking a hundred yards, Mr. Durant. Your uncle told me you were called away on business and wanted to speak to me about Lucia, and I came."

"Well, it is not of Lucia that I want to speak, but of myself. Would you have come to me as quickly, I wonder, if you had known that?"

"Of course I would. I am more interested a hundred times in you than I am, or ever shall be, in Lucia. You ought to know that, I think. What—what is this that you are going to say to me, Mr. Durant?"

Dim though the light was, Gerald could note the ebbing colour on Archie Lovell's face; could note the quick-drawn breath, the quiver of that sensitive fine-cut mouth; and, as if by inspiration, there flashed a suspicion singularly near the truth across his mind. "You have no idea already of what I am going to say, Archie? The time has come, you know, when you and I must keep no more secrets from each other."

"I—how should I? I don't understand you!"

But the words came indistinct and broken from her lips. "How is it possible that I can tell what you are going to say to me?"

"Archie," said Gerald, earnestly, "take my advice, and speak to me more openly. We shall not have ten minutes' conversation together at most, and on these ten minutes a great deal of my life and of yours may hang, I fancy. Look upon me as a friend—a brother, if you like the word better—and be frank! In short, be Archie Wilson again—Archie Wilson in the days before she had learnt to be wise!"

She stood for a minute or more, speechless, motionless, and the little hand that Gerald till now had forgotten to relinquish seemed to turn to ice within his own: at last, with a sort of sob—a sob that made Mr. Wickham in his distant corner look up one instant from his notebook, the truth came out. "I know everything, Mr. Durant," she whispered. "I was too great a coward to speak when I might have warned you, but I know everything! Captain Waters told me, and I have promised to pay him to be silent. I am an impostor, everything that is vilest, but it was for papa's sake and . . . Ah, Mr. Durant, I think the shame would kill me if I had to come forward, as Captain Waters said, and tell before a judge and a court full of men how I went with you to London!" And then, in broken whispers—the sweet face wet with tears not six inches from Gerald's—she made fullest confession of all that Waters had told her, and of her own vileness, so she called it, in determining to keep her own counsel at whatever cost.

Gerald's lips had grown set and stern long before she finished. "The scoundrel!" he muttered between

his teeth; "the double-dyed infernal scoundrel! Archie, my poor little friend, how glad I am that you have had courage to tell me all this. You shall never be troubled with Captain Waters any more. He frightened you for nothing, Archie, believe me. I am in a difficult position, the victim rather of a most ridiculous mistake, but there is no more chance of your name being brought forward in any way than of Lucia's. Keep perfectly quiet—it was this I sent for you to say; keep quiet whatever you are told or may fear, and no harm can possibly come near you, I swear it."

"And if—if my evidence is all that can prove you to be innocent?" she faltered, looking at him with dilated, frightened eyes, as Captain Waters' words came back to her recollection.

"Your evidence!" Gerald laughed, lightly. "Why, one would think you were a Lord Chancellor at least, to hear all the fine legal words you use! It will not be a question of giving evidence at all. I have to go up to London to-night with the gentleman you see standing there, and to-morrow or next day the whole mistake will be cleared up."

"And if it is not? if nothing can clear you unless I do come forward and speak. I am not a child, Mr. Durant; I have grown old and wise during the last few weeks," she added, with unconscious sadness, "and if they accuse you of having been present when this woman died, of course I *could* help you by telling how we gave her the cloak, for I am beginning to connect all these things clearly now, and how Captain Waters saw us together at Calais on board the steamer, and——"

"Archie," interrupted Gerald, gravely, "if the mis-

take is harder to prove than I think now, if I am brought into a position of absolute danger—the most improbable occurrence in the world—and want you to speak, I will send word to you to come. Seton will be with me in town most likely, and I will send him down to you—nay, don't misunderstand me," for at the mention of Ralph she had turned from him with a start, "neither Seton nor any other human being shall ever know what at present is a secret between ourselves. If I want you, Seton will bring you this simple message, 'Come.' If I do not, you will have no message from me at all. Now, I think we understand each other."

"And Captain Waters?" she asked. "I must keep my word, and send him the money."

"You must do nothing of the kind," interrupted Gerald, promptly. "You must hold no written communication whatsoever with Captain Waters. I will arrange with the gentleman—pay him the price he asks, and undertake that you, at least, shall never be troubled with him again. You have not forgotten his address, I hope?"

No, she had not forgotten it: forgotten? had one word he told her been ever really absent from her thoughts since yesterday? "Captain Waters, 50, Cranbourne Street, Leicester Square." Gerald took out a card and wrote this address down, leaning forward through the open window to catch whatever light still lingered as he did so, and Mr. Wickham, looking round quickly, remarked—in a voice which seemed, although he stood twenty feet at least away, to whisper awfully, mysteriously close to Archie's ear—that he believed the time was getting on.

"I am ready for you," said Gerald, cheerily; then

in a lower tone, "Good-bye, Archie," turning so that he sheltered the girl's shrinking figure from Wickham's sight. "Let me have your hand—so!" and he carried it to his lips, for the second, the last time in his life. "If things had gone differently, I think you might have grown to like me in time, and I—well, I could have loved you better than I have ever loved or shall love any woman while I live. The injury I did you was unintentional, you believe that, Archie? and the temptation great! Don't you recollect how blue the sea was that day, and how one accident after another seemed fated to fall upon us, and how pleasant it was to be together? You forgive me?"

She could only clasp his hand closely for answer.

"Very well, then. We shall be fast friends still, whatever happens. Recollect all I have told you about keeping quiet and not troubling yourself on my account, and—let me see, is there anything more for us to say? Well, I've got your glove, and, don't be angry, but I shall kiss it sometimes still, Archie, and think of the night I stole it from you. Do you remember our quarrel, and how bright the moon shone in as we danced that last waltz, and made friends again. You mustn't quite forget the Morteville days, you know; and however things turn out, Archie, you must try to think of me kindly! And now," with one long last look into her face, "God bless you, dear!"

This was how Mr. Durant sent his farewells to Lucia.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Fais ce que dois!"

IN painful, visible constraint, not trusting herself to speak of Gerald or of the interview that she had had with him, Archie Lovell walked home that night by Ralph's side. Early next morning Major Seton, without calling at the Rectory, left home for London; and by evening of the same day Bettina had already obtained information, from the most authentic village sources, as to the cause of Mr. Durant's departure; the profession of the mysterious man in plain clothes who had been seen to accompany him into a first-class railway carriage at the Hatton station.

These rumours, whispered at first, and contradicted as soon as whispered, were spoken next day above the breath, and allowed to pass. On the following morning a short paragraph in the London papers told the Staffordshire world how Mr. Durant had already appeared before the magistrate on the charge of being accessory to the death of Margaret Hall; and then every one rushed away to leave cards and inquiries for poor dear Lady Durant; and remembered how they always thought Gerald had a vile trick of contracting his eyebrows, and a most sinister expression at times about the corners of his mouth!

And up to the evening of the fourth day from that of his arrest, Archie Lovell heard no more than the vague, contradictory reports of the village gossips as to

how the case was going on. She called with her step-mother at the Court, ostensibly to inquire for Sir John, who had been seized with an attack of gout on the morning he was to have accompanied Seton to London, and had not left his room since. She listened while Bettina talked by the hour together of Gerald; the likelihood, considering his character, of his guilt: the disgrace to the Durants that must ensue; and the number of fine old families that she, Bettina, had seen Providence—wisely, perhaps—consign to ruin during her life. She helped her father to arrange his cabinets and hang his pictures; went on working at her garden; ate her meals; rose in the morning, and went to bed as usual. Did she suffer? She hardly knew herself. The time went awfully, deathfully slow; her heart beat thick and fast at every chance sound, every strange voice she heard; a dull, heavy weight was never absent from her brain. This was as much as Archie could have told of her own condition. Poor Mr. Lovell observing her heavy eyes and pallid cheeks, hoped, measles being about in the village, that the child was not going to take that disorder a second time: and Bettina—well, Bettina knowing all she did concerning the past, was not without a suspicion that Archie “fretted” about Gerald still, and in her own innermost soul felt not unreasonably grieved over the young man’s misfortunes. It was a terrible blow for the Durants, of course, but very lucky it all came out before the marriage instead of after; and really if he *had* had anything to do with the young woman’s death, it would be impious to wish him to escape altogether from justice. The Durants of Durant would be just as much their neighbours without him as with him; and Archie’s secret

of a vast deal less consequence. Not, poor young man, that she wished the very worst to come to him; but an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth were the words of Scripture; and Bettina had never seen any particular good come of your Colensos and other softeners-away of Holy Writ, as yet.

On the evening of August the 20th, four days after that of Gerald's arrest, Major Seton suddenly made his appearance at the Rectory. The Lovells were just at tea in their pleasant myrtle-scented little parlour, the amber sunset streaming in cheerfully through the open casement, when he was ushered in: Mr. Lovell with a manuscript book beside him on the table; Bettina chattering in high spirits as she poured out the tea; Archie in a pale muslin dress, her air shining, a flower in her waistbelt, a goodly pile of seed-cake and fruit upon her plate. Ralph Seton's heart swelled with a feeling that was almost disgust as he looked at her. Her tear-stained cheeks, her silence, her constraint upon the night of Gerald's arrest, had made him feel—all too keenly then!—that a matter of no common interest had been discussed between them during their parting interview. The fact of her never reminding him again of the money she had wished to borrow, showed, he thought, some serious preoccupation of mind, some remorse, some sympathy at least with Gerald in his danger; and during his journey down Ralph had pictured to himself continually the sorrowful face, the eyes haunted by self-reproach, that would greet him when he reached the Rectory. He saw, instead, a peaceful family group; a girl, even in such a pass as this, too frivolous (and frivolity in a woman was, to Ralph, the one unpardon-

able sin) to forget so much as the flower at her own dainty waist! her blue eyes as untroubled, her facile smile as sweet, as on that day when—Gerald out of sight and out of mind—she waved her adieux to himself at the Morteville pier: the day when he had the excessive wisdom first to resolve upon putting her away out of his heart!

Very grim and stern, the old Moustache took a chair on the side of the table next to Mr. Lovell, and away from Archie, and curtly declining Bettina's offer of tea, brought the conversation round, without an attempt at softening or preamble, to Gerald Durant. "You have all of you heard the truth by this time," he said, addressing himself ostensibly to Mrs. Lovell, "and nothing can be gained by treating the thing as a secret any longer. Gerald Durant comes up for his final examination to-morrow. They have brought the poor fellow twice before the magistrate already, and each time he has been remanded. To-morrow will settle it."

"And you think he will be found guilty?" cried Bettina, opening her eyes wide. "Dear, dear, now Major Seton, *do* you think he will be really condemned?"

"Condemned to as much as a magistrate can condemn, most certainly," was Ralph's answer. "Condemned to an imprisonment which, however it may hereafter end, will effectually blacken his hopes, his prospects, his whole future life. By this time to-morrow Gerald Durant will, in all human probability, be committed to take his trial for the wilful murder of Margaret Hall. He has the best lawyers in London to help him, and as far as the preliminary examination

goes, they all confess that the evidence against him is simply overwhelming. It is circumstantial, all of it," he went on, turning to Mr. Lovell, "but none the less crushing for that. Nothing but the unexpected proving of an alibi at the eleventh hour can save Gerald Durant now."

"And how does he take it?" asked Mr. Lovell, whose calm interest in other persons' concerns always savoured rather of æsthetic than of commonplace human curiosity. "The situation of an innocent man awaiting an unjust doom is one of the deepest dramatic interest, yet I suspect most writers in treating it take their stand on a somewhat too transcendental ground. Now this Mr.—Durant, to be sure, the same name as the people at the Court—is, I dare say, not at all in the inflamed heroic state of mind that the majority of dramatists and poets would, under such circumstances, paint?"

"He is," answered Ralph, purposely speaking slow and distinct so as to give his words a chance of sinking even on the "frivolous" heart of Archie Lovell, "more frankly, unaffectedly cheerful than I ever thought to see any man in such a position. Not indifferent to what to-morrow may bring—poor lad! for he thinks of those who will suffer by his disgrace—but as calmly ready to meet it as the men of his race have always been to meet danger. Until I looked at Gerald Durant's face in prison I don't think I ever rightly understood the meaning of the word 'loyalty.'"

Bettina sighed heavily as she raised her tea-cup to her lips. "Let us hope all things," she murmured, "even while we fear the worst. Let us hope that, as

in the case of Jeroboam, hardened impenitence is not being added to the weight of the young man's sins."

"I think not, Mrs. Lovell," said Ralph, with cold emphasis; "Gerald Durant is, *I know*, as innocent of the monstrous charge brought against him as I am. He had not seen Margaret Hall for months; he had no interest in her death; he was not on London Bridge at the moment when her death took place. A chain of unhappy accidents has, I believe, so woven itself around him, that he is not able to bring forward evidence in his own favour without betraying the confidence of another person; and this poor Gerald would no more do than one of his Jacobite ancestors would have saved himself by wishing life to King George upon the scaffold."

"Well, then, he is a fine fellow," exclaimed Mr. Lovell, with animation; "and I should like to shake his hand. It is not often now that one comes across a trait of the Bayard-like, chivalrous feeling of old days. What manner of man can he be, though, who will accept his safety at such a price? Archie, are you listening? This friend of Seton's is ready, like one of the knights of old, to brave his own disgrace, sooner than betray a trust reposed in him . . . nay, but the story is too much for you, little one! Look at her face, Ralph—she is always so—any story of high resolve, or courage, is always too much for Archie's heart."

She was of an awful, greyish pallor, a pallor that extended to her lips and throat, and her eyes were fixed with a yearning, eager expression, on her father's face. "It is not too much for me at all, papa," bringing out each syllable with a painful, visible effort.

"I know I am pale—I can't help it—I turn so always when I hear of things that move me. Papa, you would like to shake Gerald Durant's hand, you say? Would you like to shake the hand of the person he is seeking to screen? I mean if—if that person voluntarily accepts his safety."

"No, Archie," said Mr. Lovell, half-smiling at her eagerness. "I would no more care to shake his hand or to hold fellowship with him than you would. Cowardice is the one thing (strange that it should be so, Seton! 'tis the most natural of our vices) that puts a man—or woman, either, for the matter of that—for ever out of the reach of my sympathy."

Then, after an aside from Bettina as to "cowardice being one thing, my poor Frederick, and common worldly prudence another," Major Seton suffered the conversation to go into a fresh channel: and in a few minutes Archie rose and stole out alone, her father stopping her to kiss her cheek and her hand as she passed, to the garden.

Cool, sweet, silent almost to mournfulness, was the August evening at that half-hour after sunset: the sky of opal paleness, save where one mighty rose-flush stained the west; a solitary planet shining faint above the pure horizon; the light on russet woods and yellow cornfields slowly dying, through a thousand gradations of fleeting colour, into the exquisite sombre purple of the night. With a feeling almost of loathing at the sight of all that smiling golden calm, Archie walked away to the part of the garden farthest from the house; and there seating herself wearily upon the low stone wall that formed the boundary of the little orchard,

strove to steady the beatings of her feverish heart; to collect her thoughts; to reason; to resolve.

Earnestly, with her very might, she strove; and, instead of obeying her, her heart throbbed on more hotly, her thoughts refused to concentrate themselves, her senses took note, with intense, with sickening acuteness, of every outward object by which she was surrounded: the sweet smell of a neighbouring bed of kitchen-herbs; the ridiculous tumult the grasshoppers were making in the orchard; the redness of the apples on one particular bough that overhung the wall. When she had remained thus five minutes, or an hour, she knew not which—there are conditions of the body under which all these arbitrary divisions of time exist for us no more than time itself exists for a man who dreams—a measured step she knew came along the gravel path. She started up nervously, and turning round, found Ralph Seton standing close beside her. Oldened and worn her face seemed to him now that he saw it in the broad evening light; the fair young forehead lined and heavy; the cheeks sunken; a deep shade round the eyes, giving their blue an almost unnatural lustre. “Major Seton,” she exclaimed, abruptly, “explain the meaning of the word alibi to me. I have been told once, but I forget.”

“An alibi consists in proving the presence of an accused man in some other place than that where his supposed crime was committed, Archie. An alibi, as I told your father, is all we can look to now for saving Gerald Durant to-morrow.”

“Have you seen him to-day?”

“I have. I saw him not an hour before I left London this afternoon.”

"And he told you that there was some person whose evidence could yet save him? He told you there was some person whose secret he was determined never to betray?"

"No, Archie, he did not. I believe, nay, I know, that this is the case; and I urged upon him—I speak to you frankly—I urged upon him that it was his duty to neglect no means of proving his own innocence——"

"Go on," she exclaimed, breathlessly. "Why do you hesitate? He answered——"

"By laughing at the very idea of the generosity I imputed to him," replied Ralph. "Said that I might be quite sure he would take better care of himself than of anybody else; that—while he trusted implicitly in his innocence making itself felt in the end—an alibi was the one thing it was not in his power to prove. At the very time when it was necessary to account for himself he was driving about London in a hansom, the number of which he had not even looked at, and——"

"And at what hour does his trial take place?" interrupted Archie, shortly, and in a hard, unmodulated voice. "The trial to-morrow, I mean?"

"The examination—it is not a trial yet—is to begin at ten o'clock," answered Major Seton. "It will last over a good many hours, possibly will not be finished in one day. Sir John Durant is coming up, if he is well enough, by the first express, and will be in time, poor old man! to hear all that concerns him most—the evidence, such as it is, that will be brought forward in Gerald's defence."

"And you—when do you return?"

"By the mail-train to-night. I came down for a few hours only, principally, Archie, to see you."

"Did Mr. Durant send me any message?"

"He bade me tell you that everything was right; and he hoped you would go over often and see his cousin Lucia."

"And what does a return-ticket cost from Hatton to London?"

"A return-ticket costs exactly two sovereigns, Archie. Do you want to go to London?"

"I wish you would lend me two sovereigns, Major Seton. I asked you for money before, and did not want it after all—most likely I shan't want this—still I wish that you would lend it to me."

He took out his purse and, without speaking a word, put two sovereigns into Archie's hand: burning with fever he felt her hand was as it came into contact with his own.

"You have nothing else to say to me, Archie, before I go? for my time is up; I must say good-bye to you directly. There is no other way in which I can be of use to you?"

"I—I don't know that there is," she faltered. "Tell Mr. Durant you saw me and gave me his message, and—oh Ralph!" with a sudden impulse, and moving a step nearer to his side, "how I wish that I dared ask you one question before you go!"

"Ask it, Archie," said Ralph. "I will give you a very truthful answer if I can."

"Well, if—mind, this is all that I mean to tell you—if any one, a girl of my age, was placed . . . placed, how shall I say it?—so that to save another person she must run the risk of forfeiting her own good

name, the good name of all the people she cared for most, what ought she to do? If I asked Bettina she would talk about pride and self-respect and family honour! and papa! I cannot—I will not ask. Now what do you say?"

"*Fais ce que dois*," answered Major Seton, instantly. "Truth, uncompromising, unwavering, is the only rule of life that I have ever known to answer either for man or for woman. If pride and self-respect and family honour had to be maintained by sacrificing it, they would not, I should imagine, be worth holding—any of them."

"And the good opinion of the people who love one," faltered the girl, with pitiful earnestness, "Ralph—dear Ralph!—is that to be sacrificed as nothing too?"

"Most unquestionably," said Ralph, without a softening inflection in his staid Scotch voice. "Love that had to be bought by falsehood would be a dear bargain in the end, depend upon it, Archie."

"Ah! I am glad I had the courage to ask you this; there is only one more thing I have to trouble you about now. If, Ralph, at any time it should happen that you grow to despise or hate me—don't let it make any difference between you and papa. Everything bad that I have done has been by my own free will—no one ought to suffer for it but me—and papa—poor papa would want your friendship all the more if anything happened to turn him a little from me. Will you promise me this?"

"I don't think it requires a promise, Archie," he answered. "I endeavour when I can to be just. My

regard for your father would be strengthened rather than lessened by any ill-doing of yours."

"Thank you, Ralph"—her heart dying within her at his coldness—"you have been very good to me, and I . . . have been false to you from the first hour I saw you in Morteville till now! It's all past, and I don't know, if I had to go through it again, that I should act differently—however, it's no use talking about that now. You'll remember your word, I think? you'll be good to papa whatever happens——"

And then her voice broke into a sob: she turned; walked abruptly away from his side, and Ralph Seton saw her face no more.

Despise! hate! Never had he so passionately loved her as in this moment of her humiliation, this crowning hour of sorrow in her child's life! The truth was told: the "frivolous" heart of Archie Lovell laid bare before him at last.

CHAPTER XV.

Awakening Conscience.

THE evening that had closed in with such fair promise for the morrow, was already changing by the time that the moon rose, pale and watery, above the distant woods. As night wore on, the wind swept up in fitful gusts from the south-west, bearing before it thick wreaths of serried lead-white cloud, and when the morning dawned it was in rain: fine driving rain, that fell with a persistent wintry sound against the exposed windows of Hatton Rectory, and laid low whatever summer flowers still lingered in the borders of its little upland garden.

And throughout all the dreary hours, from that chill moonrise to the chiller morning, Archie Lovell never slept. Men and women meet their troubles more sharply face to face upon their pillows than at any other time: a child sobs his to rest there in five minutes: and Archie till to-night had been a child, even in her fashion of suffering. This was past. The first real conflict of reason and passion which her life had known, was stirring in her now: and sleep, the blessed immunity of unawakened conscience, was over. For a short space after her head was laid upon its pillow, the girl was her old self—the old childish mixture of frivolity and earnestness—still: speculating, through her tears, as to what Ralph had thought of her after her half-confession; wondering (if she went) what frock

and ribbons she would look well in to-morrow; and if the magistrate would speak to her "out aloud" before all the lawyers and people in the court; and if her name, Archie Lovell, would really be put in print in the papers next day, and if, supposing she stayed away, some other witness would not be sure to come forward and save poor Mr. Durant at the last! Then, when her faculties were more than half-way along the accustomed quick sweet road to sleep, every detail of her position and of her duty seemed suddenly to start out before her in a new light—a harsh, pitiless, concentrated light; such as she had never seen any position or any duty in before. It was not a question, a voice beside her pillow seemed to say, of whether her father might or might not suffer by her exposure; not a question of whether Gerald Durant had or had not deserved her gratitude, of whether she might or might not forfeit Ralph Seton's love. It was a question of abstract right or wrong; truth or falsehood; life or death as regarded her own soul, which her resolutions of to-night must solve. If she decided unrighteously: shielded her father, won Ralph's love, won the whole world, and perjured *that*, how much would she have gained? This was what she had to answer. And starting back to fullest consciousness, with a trembling sense of some other presence than hers in the little room, the poor child sat up in her bed, and there—the cold dew standing on her face and hands—strove through the dark hours of the night to wrestle with the unseen awful monitor who had arisen to question her.

It is only, perhaps, by a strong effort of imagination that we who have fought many such battles, gained

the victory sometimes and more often succumbed, can picture to ourselves the first passionate conflict of so very white a soul as this. With all the suddenly awakened woman's conscience, Archie had still a child's narrow vision, a child's distorted fear of the punishment that would fall upon herself as the price of her truth-telling; and the greater part of her thoughts would be to the full as ludicrous as pathetic, if faithfully recorded. Of the truths originally laid down by Bettina, she never for an instant doubted. A girl who had passed a day and a night away from home, as she had done, must, if her story became known, be disgraced. No honest woman would associate with her; no honest man would ever make her his wife. Up to a certain hour to-morrow she would be Archie Lovell, a girl with all bright possibilities of life open before her still: after that—a blank. Never another ball, or croquet party, or happy walk with Ralph! No more pleasure in her good looks, or her dress: no more of the vague golden dreams which of late had made her like to be alone, looking up at the clouds, or across the woods to Ludbrooke, in the twilight! She would live on, year after year, in this dull Rectory-house; and her father would love her always—with a saddened, pitying love; and Bettina be justified in requiring her to be religious; and the servants whisper together, and look at her as something apart from the rest of the household; bitterest of all, Lady Durant and Lucia would know her, in a distant way, still, her father being the clergyman of their parish; Sir John, perhaps, his wife and daughter not by, stop and speak a kind word occasionally, when he met her in his walks. This would be her life. And in time, she would see Gerald happy with his fair

young wife; and Ralph would marry too . . . were her friends to abstain from happiness because hers happened to be spoiled? and she would just continue to stagnate on, alone, unloved, till she was old and graceless, and bitter, like Mrs. Maloney! This was to be her portion and reward for doing the thing that was right: and still towards the right (not towards Mr. Gerald Durant, personally; inasmuch as he was young, and handsome, and fond of her: the foundation, hitherto, of whatever heroic resolves Archie had formed), she felt herself irresistibly drawn. Towards right, simply as right. Nothing to do with inherited traditions, as in Gerald's case: or with fears of heaven, on one hand, and hopes of the world on the other, as in Bettina's. Right simply as right: a stern inflexible reality, to which, whether her cowardly will shrank from its fulfilment or no, she was forced, by some sympathy, some instinct stronger than herself, to cling.

She tossed feverishly on her pillow till dawn, then got up, went across to the casement-window, drew back the curtain, and looked out. Standing there in her long white dress, her feet bare, her hands clasped across her breast, poor Archie, who a week ago could have represented nothing higher in art than Greuze or Watteau, might at this moment have been taken as a living picture of one of Raphael's Marys: a girl still in the undeveloped form and childish attitude, a woman in the unutterable sadness, the wistful prophecy of suffering upon her quivering lips, and tear-stained, dead-white cheeks. It was barely daybreak yet. She could just discern the line of distant woods, wan and spectre-like, through the driving mists; could just see the geraniums and mignonette -- the flowers that in her

southern ignorance she had thought would last till Christmas—lying, sodden and defaced, beneath her window. What a miserable, altered world it looked! What an admirably fitted world for right and duty, and the life that she was going to lead in it! She stood, chilled and shivering, yet with a sort of sullen satisfaction, watching the rain as it beat against the window; and while she watched it her heart—poor, unheroic child's heart!—went back to irresolution again. How would it be possible for her to walk to the station in weather like this? They had no carriage, and there was no way of hiring one, and her father and Bettina would never let her start alone on foot. She had meant, had meant faithfully, to go. Had she not borrowed money from Ralph for her journey last night? Could she help it if accidents beyond her own control held her back? If it had been fine, and her father had given her leave, she would have gone; and now, if this storm lasted, and her father forbade her to leave home, she must stay. It would no longer be a question of choice, it would be a decision made by fate, not herself, as to which path she took, and by that decision she must abide.

When dawn had become broad day she crept back to her bed, and in two or three minutes, the rain still driving against the window, was asleep. At seven o'clock Bettina knocked as usual at her door, calling out to her cheerfully that it was a beautiful morning after the rain, and, waking with a start from a heavy, dreamless sleep, Archie saw—with guilty disappointment even in that first instant of consciousness—a room full of light and sunshine. The storm was over.

So far the path towards this miserable, self-imposed, inexorable duty of hers lay clear.

She got up; dressed herself in a clean white frock; then laid out ready on her drawers her muslin scarf, sailor's hat, and blue veil, and, for the first time since the day after her return from London, went down to breakfast with her hair hanging loose upon her shoulders.

"As I like to see you once more," said Mr. Lovell, as he put his arms round her. "If you knew what was becoming, Archie, you would never torture your hair into fashionable braids and twists again. But how ill you look, my child!" anxiously scrutinising the hard lines about her mouth, the worn, dark hollows under her eyes. "Bettina, don't you think her looking really ill? Wouldn't it be as wise for her to keep to her bed for a day, just to see whether it can be measles coming on again or not?"

If Bettina had thought enough about the question to say "Yes," Archie would probably have succumbed to her decision as final: the interposition of some will stronger than her own, and against which it would be idle for her to struggle. But all Mrs. Lovell's energies happened to be directed at this particular moment to parish matters of the most vital and urgent interest. In the vestry of the church was to be held to-day the great annual meeting of the Hatton soup and flannel club, in which, the deceased rector being an old bachelor, the wife of the village doctor had for years held absolute and tyrannical sway. A secret cabal had long existed, it appeared, for the dethronement of this potentate; and in Bettina—versed already in every detail of the village civil wars; convinced, too, that to be the

head of soup and flannel was hers by anointed right—the cabal had at length found a leader. A large, an overwhelming, majority of voters were, she believed, safe on the side of herself and the new coalition. Still, at the very last, a designing, ambitious woman like the doctor's wife might be capable of anything—bribing the voters to stay away; incapacitating them *pro tem.* out of her husband's bottles; anything. And in fierce haste, her bonnet already on her head, Bettina, eager to be off to the field, was swallowing scalding tea, standing, and learning by heart an extempore speech with which she meant to address the meeting, when her husband spoke.

“Measles? Nonsense, Frederick! Not one person in a hundred has measles a second time. Let Archie be in the air all day, the heat makes her pale. ‘It being the opinion of this meeting, and of the parish generally, that too much power has hitherto been usurped by *certain parties* . . .’ That will be the very thing. Cutting, but not too personal. You are sure, Frederick, you will not look in upon us in the course of the meeting? Well, then, I must express your opinions for you. You shall not be a cipher in your own parish, as long as I can prevent it. Don’t wait dinner for me—I may be away all day.” And then, still learning her speech aloud as she walked, Mrs. Lovell vanished; and another obstacle in the path of Archie’s going to London was removed.

It was now nearly nine o’clock; the express train by which Sir John Durant was to go left Hatton station at ten. She went up to her room, put on her sailor’s hat and white scarf, took the French grey parasol from Bettina’s room, and came down again to her father.

She had not the smallest idea of what she would have to do or say when she found herself in that London police court, but she thought vaguely that she had better appear there dressed exactly as she had been on the day of her flight from Morteville. It might help to prove that her story was true; the woman who lent her the cloak would be present, perhaps, to confront her; and she had no wish to hide one iota of the truth now. The magistrate, the lawyers, all the world should see her as she was on that day, the last day of her innocence—in her white frock, and sailor's hat, and with her hair hanging on her shoulders. Perhaps (the hope half crossed her) they would not judge her so very hard when they saw how pretty and how childish she had looked at that fatal time of her wrongdoing!

Mr. Lovell was in the room that was to be his study, standing before "Troy," a little disquieted in his heart as to that *chef d'œuvre* not being in the best possible light, when Archie returned to him. She thought of the night in Morteville when she had stood at his side in the little painting-room, and mourned with him for the old Bohemian life that was over for ever. Over—everything was over now! She crept up softly, and touched his hand.

"Papa, I have a favour to ask of you, please. Some of the Durants are going up to London and back to-day—Major Seton told me so last night—and I want you to let me go too. They will be quite ready to take care of me, I know."

Mr. Lovell turned round and looked at her with open eyes.

"To London and back? Why, Archie, this will

never do! No, no, no, child; don't take such fancies. The Durants are going up, of course, about this difficulty the young man—Gerald, is he called?—has got into, and won't want you. I couldn't hear of it. I shall be having you laid up in earnest. Ask me anything else."

"I want nothing else, papa. It shall be as you choose—only, I thought I would just ask you, you know." And she took off her hat, and seated herself down resignedly by the open window. Could she help it if her father insisted on withholding his consent? Had she not done as much as lay within her power to do by asking him?

"The weather, certainly, is not so hot after the rain as it was," said Mr. Lovell, coming up to her side, and pretending to look out at the clouds. He had never been able to deny Archie anything since that morning fourteen years ago when he had refused to get up at five o'clock, and carry her round the Dresden market. "The weather is not as hot, and if I was quite sure we should have no more storms—only, unfortunately, my love, I have not a farthing of change in the house. I don't know how it happened, but Bettina took off my last shilling with her to this dreadful meeting."

"I have the money, papa, I have two sovereigns of my own, but I don't want to go unless you choose."

"And are you quite sure the Durants are going and want you?—not that I wonder at that—Miss Durant must be too glad, poor thing, to have you for her companion now. Well then, Archie, I don't know really that I ought to forbid it. It is like you, my little one, to wish to be with your friends at a season of trouble like this!"

And in a quarter of an hour's time Archie was walking across the meadow path that led the shortest way from the Rectory to the station. She was not going to be saved by accidental help, she felt now. Of her own free will she had taken the first step in the direction of right, but every obstacle that might have hindered its fulfilment had been removed by alien means, not by any endeavours of her own. Unless Sir John Durant were at the last too ill to travel, nothing could save her now from the accomplishment of her work. Unless! How tumultuously her heart throbbed at the thought! It would be impossible, utterly, for her to go alone—she, who knew nothing of London, not even the name of the court at which Gerald was to be tried. If Sir John Durant did not go, her whole self-constructed scheme of duty must, of necessity, fall to the ground. It would be a question of will no longer. She would have tried her best to carry out the moral suicide which she conceived to be right, and have failed in it perforce, not through any fault or weakness of her own.

The Durants' carriage stood at the door of Hatton station, and the first persons Archie saw as she entered the office were Sir John and Lucia standing together outside upon the platform. She bought a first-class return ticket for London—with a consciousness that the clerk stared strangely at her as he put it in her hand—went out and joined them.

"Going up to London and back alone?" cried Miss Durant, aghast, when Archie had declared her intentions. "Why, I should be frightened to death! I should think every one I met was a madman in disguise, or something more dreadful still! And—and

in that dress!" drawing her aside. "Do you know, Miss Lovell?—you won't mind my telling you I am sure, but no one wears white dresses and sailor hats in London!"

"Don't they, indeed!" said Archie, brusquely; "well, I'm going on business, very painful business, and I shan't be thinking whether people look at my dress or not. Who can think of dress at such a time as this, Lucia?"—calling the heiress of Durant's Court by her Christian name for the first time—"you don't know how miserable I am about all this trouble that has fallen upon you."

From her infancy upwards, Lucia had always been equal to any emergency requiring pretty pious sentiments, and a nice little lady-like way of expressing them; and what she answered was very well chosen and well said, and utterly devoid, to Archie's heart, of anything like the ring of deep or passionate feeling. It had been terribly sudden, and her mamma at first had broken down, but was calmer now—their old governess and friend, Miss Barlow, having come to spend a few days with them—and it was very painful to think of its being in everybody's mouth, but there was much to be thankful for, especially that it should have occurred now, not later, and Miss Barlow's presence was a great solace to them; Miss Barlow having a mind beautifully schooled by affliction.

"I'd rather be alone," said Archie, turning from her abruptly. "I should decline solace from Miss Barlow, or Miss Anybody in the world, if *my* heart was full!"

After this she stood silent—thinking over the character of the woman for whose happiness she was

about to surrender her own—until the train came up. Then, in spite of renewed warnings from Miss Durant as to madmen, got into a carriage away from old Sir John, and as it chanced remained alone the entire way to London. What an Eternity that journey seemed! how slow the pace—fifty miles an hour—to her feverish heart! how she hoped, with blent terror and impatience, that every large town they came near would be London at last! Now that the excitement of action had set in, all she wanted was to be at her journey's end, and before Ralph Seton—before the whole world—to tell her story in the court. The bravery which is not so much courage as a desperate desire to get through the worst quickly, had come to her at last: and the moment the train reached Euston Square she jumped out on the platform; then, without giving herself time to think or hesitate, walked straight up to Sir John Durant as he was getting down slowly and with difficulty from his carriage.

"I have a favour to ask of you, Sir John," bringing out each word with mechanical distinctness, as if she was repeating some lesson that she had learnt by heart. "Take me with you to the court where Mr. Gerald Durant is to be tried to-day."

Poor old Sir John looked at her in blank surprise. "To the court? my dear Miss Lovell, impossible; you don't know what you ask—a London police-court is no place for you. At any other time, in any other way, you may command my services, but now you must really excuse me if I am obliged to refuse you." And he bowed to her, with his courteous old-fashioned air of deference, and walked on a few steps alone down the platform.

But Archie followed him pertinaciously. "Sir John, it is impossible for you to deny me in this!" she said, touching his arm with her hand. "I *must* be at Mr. Durant's trial! I—I have important evidence to give there, and if you refuse to take me with you I must go alone. Surely, for your nephew's sake, you will give me your protection as far as the court?"

At the word "evidence" Sir John Durant stopped; and as he looked down into Archie Lovell's face, something in its intense, its painful eagerness, touched him with an irresistible conviction of her sincerity at least. That her presence could be of any service to Gerald was of course out of the question: but it was impossible to doubt that her request was made in good faith; not for the gratification of a girlish caprice, as he had thought at first.

"You will take me with you?" she repeated, as she saw him hesitate. "You will help me, for Gerald's sake, in what I have to do when we reach the court?"

"You put it out of my power to refuse you, Miss Lovell," answered the old man, gravely. "If you insist upon exposing yourself—uselessly, I fear—to a scene of such a nature, I will certainly take you with me to the court, and when we arrive there I will arrange, if it is not too late, for you to speak with one of my nephew's lawyers, if I am satisfied, that is to say—"

"You will—you must be satisfied!" interrupted Archie, impetuously. "Do you think I am asking you this without reason, or for my own pleasure? You talk of being too late. . . . Why do we waste a moment standing here if there is a chance of it?" And putting her hand within Sir John Durant's arm, she walked beside

him with a firm unshrinking step through the crowded station: a minute later knew that she was being borne along through the mocking glare and life and tumult of the London streets to her doom.

Too late! Oh, Heaven, too late! But the guilty cry found utterance in her heart alone. All was not over then—there was a chance of her own salvation even yet!

CHAPTER XVI.

"Where is she?"

SOME of the best lawyers in England had been retained for Gerald: the great Mr. Slight to watch his case during the preliminary examination: the greater Serjeant Adams to defend him in the event of his being tried hereafter before a judge. Some of the best lawyers in England were engaged, likewise, on the side of the Crown: and amongst the whole high legal phalanx, amongst the lawyers for the prosecution and the lawyers for the defence alike, one opinion was fast becoming universal: namely, that the prisoner's committal for trial was inevitable.

Whether Gerald Durant happened to be guilty or innocent in the matter was, of course, a very secondary detail in the sight of the profession. The vital question was: would the evidence against him be too much even for Slight—now that the Crown had recalled old Sleek from Italy to conduct the prosecution? And the unanimous answer was, Yes. Not a link seemed wanting in the chain of circumstantial evidence that Mr. Wickham's fertile genius had evoked. The motive for committing the crime with which the prisoner stood charged: his presence at the fatal hour upon the scene of guilt: the identity of the girl who was seen in his company on London Bridge: his suspicious manner immediately after her death was known to have taken place: of these, as of a dozen other minor facts, there

was, it was affirmed, proof incontestable. And still, as far even as an attempt at his own justification went, Gerald Durant's lips, to friends and counsellors alike, continued obstinately sealed! He was innocent, he said, and had not the slightest fear of anything so ridiculous as the law finding him guilty. No innocent men were ever condemned now-a-days, and very few guilty ones. Circumstances connected with other people withheld him from explaining one or two things that at present, perhaps, did look rather suspicious in the case. It was folly to think that everything would not come right in the end. And so when the final day of his examination came, and while his approaching committal was looked upon as a certainty among the lawyers, even those who cared for Gerald most, dared hope no more than that he might escape the charge of actual criminality as regarded Margaret Hall's death. That he was with her up to the last there seemed scarcely a possibility of disproving; that he was the cause of her death there could be, it was hoped, no direct evidence to show. What more likely than that, immediately after leaving her lover, or, as it was now whispered pretty loudly, her husband, the unhappy girl, maddened by his neglect or his coldness, had made away with her own life? Not a defence calculated, certainly, to restore Gerald Durant with unsullied name to the world; but when it becomes a question, like this, of life and death, what the friends of an accused man begin to think about, I imagine, is his safety—the life that is worth so little, rather than the good name, without which, to most men, life itself is intolerable. This, at all events, was the desperate view of his case to which, with one exception, Gerald's friends (men

who a fortnight ago would have staked their lives upon the certainty of his innocence) were now reduced.

The exception was Ralph. Of the promise which sealed Gerald's lips with respect to Dennison's marriage, he of course knew nothing: of his silence concerning that fatal night when Archie Lovell had been his companion in London, Major Seton understood the cause as well as Gerald understood it himself. And placed in the same position—yes, even with Archie to be saved, Ralph, in his inmost, modest heart, believed that he would have acted far less chivalrously than his friend.

"A man's first duty is to his God—his second to himself," he said to Gerald on the morning of the final examination; the last time he ever visited Gerald Durant in his prison. "I know, just as well as if you had told me, that you are silent to shelter some other person's reputation, and I believe, on my soul, that you are wrong! If I was in your place, and knew that my truth-telling would cover with mere conventional shame the name—well, the name of the woman I loved best on earth," said Ralph, the blood rising over his rough old face, "and save my own from blackest, unmerited dishonour, I believe that I would tell it. I don't see that you owe a stronger duty to any man or woman living than you owe to yourself. The thing is, to do simply what is right."

"Right!" said Gerald, with a smile; that careless smile of his which was the real beauty of his face. "But, my dear fellow, what is right? *Monsieur Seton me le répond, mais qui me répond de Monsieur Seton?* The world, according to Figuiet—I never went deeper, was in twilight during a few thousand years—Cam-

brian or Silurian epoch, I forget which—with the sun just strong enough to allow the graptolites and trilobites to see a yard or two before their noses. I suppose we are morally in the same kind of twilight now. Vague lights break in upon us of something higher than mere eating, drinking, and sleeping, and in our different ways, and under different names, we try to follow them. Definitely, we don't see much further, I fancy, than the trilobites did; not so far, perhaps, for as their eyes had about five hundred facets that enabled them to look about them in all directions at once, they were better adapted to their situation most likely than we are to ours."

This was talk entirely out of the range of the old Moustache. Who was Figuier? and what were graptolites and trilobites? The earth at the beginning was without form and void, and in six days was covered with life as we see it now. And truth was truth, and falsehood falsehood; and neither deep thinking nor fine talking had ever smoothened down the path between them in his sight.

"You follow your own idea of honour, Durant," laying his arm affectionately on Gerald's shoulder, "and—while you talk of not distinguishing right from wrong—'tis a nobler one, I feel, than mine; just that. You have the edge on all your finer emotions yet"—poor simple Ralph!—"and mine is blunted. When you have lived to my age perhaps you will not think any woman worth the sacrifice of your own honour, the risk of your own life."

"I should think this one worth it always," said Gerald, simply; "for there can be no harm now in my confessing this much to you, Seton—there is a good

name, a name worth a vast deal more than mine, that my silence shields. If it had been a love-affair, which it never was" — even at this moment what a thrill of delight shot through Major Seton's heart! — "I might feel very differently. Love, between a man and woman of the world, I have always held to be a stand-up fight, in which a fair field and no favour is all that can be reasonably required on either side. Each risks something; each must abide by the issue of the contest. But this was nothing of the kind. An honest, true-hearted little girl through me was very nearly brought to grief once. I don't say whether I was in love with her; for certain she was not in love with me, and — well, everything turned out as it should have done, and is forgotten."

"And this is the woman with whom you were seen on that night?" said Ralph in an altered voice, as Gerald hesitated. "This is —"

"This is one of the causes for which I am and ever shall be silent," answered Gerald, gravely. "To betray such a trust would be a worse betrayal than that of friend or mistress — the betrayal of a child. If the honour of every Durant who ever lived could be saved by her disgrace, the honour of the Durants should go!" And then he turned the conversation pointedly aside, and during the short remainder of time they were together, spoke only of the business matters that he wished Ralph to fulfil for him in the event of his committal; an event which, in spite of all his outward calmness, Major Seton could see he had now thoroughly prepared himself to meet.

The time at which the examination was to take place was ten o'clock. From an early hour in the

morning, however, every approach to the court was besieged by such people—many of them, although London was “empty” of the better class—as were possessed of cards giving them a right of entrance to this charming little sensation drama of real life about to be played. Without such cards no admission save by sheer physical strength could be obtained; and even the fortunate men and women who held them found they had plenty of hard work to go through, many a severe struggle with the experienced roughs to encounter, before an entrance to the scene of their morning’s amusement could be won.

At ten o’clock precisely the prisoner, or principal actor in the entertainment, was brought into the dock; and a breathless hush passed through the entire mass of spectators at the sight of him. He was a little pale and worn, as any man might well be after a week spent in a London prison in August, but looked in good spirits and smiled and nodded to his different friends, Ralph among the rest, as one after another he recognised them amidst the crowd. Mr. Slight, who “watched” the case for the prisoner, now applied for a copy of the information on which the warrant was granted, with a view, he said, to see what were the statements laid down, and also who was nominally the prosecutor in the case. This, after some discussion, was granted; and then the warrant having been read over to the prisoner, and the witnesses ordered out of court, the well-known short rubicund figure of Mr. Sleek rose, on behalf of the Crown, to address the bench.

He appeared before them, he said, in his soft, well-modulated voice, for the purpose of preferring and bringing home, as he trusted he would do, the charge

against the prisoner at the bar which had just been read from the warrant. The offence they were about to inquire into was one of a most heinous character. He did not think that he should be putting it too strongly if he said it was one of *the* most heinous, the most cowardly, the most repugnant to every natural and divine law, that it was in the power of man to commit. Such observations however (having made them) were, Mr. Sleek continued, out of place here. They had met for the purpose only of instituting a preliminary examination; and if he should adduce facts to justify the bench in committing the prisoner for trial, it would of course be the duty of the prosecution to elaborate those facts, and produce them hereafter in a more complete form than he had an opportunity of doing in this court. The offence with which Mr. Durant stood charged was that of murder, the victim was a young and beautiful girl—a girl, it was scarcely possible to doubt, bound to the prisoner by all those ties which constitute a woman's dearest and most sacred claim to man's love and protection. Mr. Sleek and the court generally showed emotion; an irrepressible smile passed for an instant over Gerald's face. It appeared that at about a quarter-past ten on the night of the second instant, a dark body was heard to fall or to be thrown with violence into the Thames from London Bridge; an alarm was instantly raised, and by three o'clock next morning the body of deceased was found, some three or four hundred yards down the river, with life extinct. An inquest was held on the following day, but was unfortunately conducted with the deplorable looseness that Mr. Sleek had observed to be the general rule of coroners' inquests, and nothing of material im-

portance was brought to light. Circumstances arising, however, immediately afterwards which aroused the suspicions of the police, to Inspector Wickham of the detective force was entrusted the duty of making further inquiry into this darkly mysterious tragedy; and—thanks to the skill and unremitting attention of that excellent officer—the prosecution was now in a position to present to the bench the following facts: facts which Mr. Sleek believed could leave them no alternative whatever but the committal of the prisoner for trial before another court. It seemed that as long ago as the tenth of January, the deceased girl left her employer's house in Staffordshire, and although rumours as to the supposed companion of her flight were rife at the time about the county, nothing definite had since transpired on the subject. On the night of the second instant, a girl dressed in the clothes in which the body of Margaret Hall was afterwards found was seen, at a few minutes before ten, walking across London Bridge from the Surrey side upon a man's arm; at a quarter-past ten a woman's shriek was heard, a dark body seen to fall into the water; and by an early hour next morning a woman's body was found drifted in among some shipping at a little distance down the river. That the woman who thus crossed the bridge was Margaret Hall there was, as he should hereafter show, no reasonable cause to doubt. The man upon whose arm she leaned was, it would be proved by incontestable evidence, the prisoner—Mr. Gerald Durant.

Profound sensation through the court. A smile, unconcealed this time, passed across the prisoner's face.

Medical testimony, proceeded Mr. Sleek, would be

called to show the condition in which the body was found. They would be told of a wedding-ring tied by a ribbon around the unhappy girl's neck; of a handkerchief embroidered with Mr. Durant's monogram in her breast; and they would also hear evidence as to a man's hat, which was found floating in the river; and which it would be proved was the property of the prisoner. The next points that it would be his duty to bring before their consideration were the acts and conduct of Mr. Durant himself. On that second day of August he was proved to have crossed from Morteville to London in the company of a young girl, answering to the description of the deceased, Margaret Hall. On the passage across, one of their fellow-travellers lent the girl a cloak, which in the hurry of landing was not returned to its owner, and in this cloak the body of Margaret Hall was found. At about ten o'clock, as he had stated, Mr. Durant, with the girl upon his arm, was seen walking upon London Bridge, and it was remarked at the time that there was something strange and excited about the appearance of them both. What was the prisoner's subsequent conduct? Between eleven and twelve, minus a hat, and with his dress disordered and torn, Mr. Durant went to the chambers of a Mr. Robert Dennison, a relation of his in the Temple; gave curt and contradictory answers when questioned by his friends as to the strangeness of his appearance; and finally let fall a remark about having just seen the ghost of an old friend's face—"a Staffordshire face"—on London Bridge, as though to account for his pallor and depression. Every portion of this evidence was, Mr. Sleek allowed, circumstantial; but it was not necessary, neither was it his place to observe, that a

concurrence of suspicious circumstances was of all human evidence the one least liable to bias or error, more particularly when the silence of the accused and of his counsellors tacitly admitted such circumstances to be authentic. It was a melancholy satisfaction of course to know that Mr. Durant was in a position to command the best services of the profession. Her Majesty's government wished to press a conviction upon no man; and it was a satisfaction to know that everything that could be said on behalf of the prisoner *would* be said, and with the greatest force and eloquence. Still, what would really tell far more in Mr. Durant's favour, what it would yield himself, Mr. Sleek, the most unmixed personal satisfaction to hear, would be—not eloquence at all, but a plain straightforward counter-statement of facts as regarded Mr. Durant's proceedings on the night of August the second! It was an axiom of English law that no man should be called upon to offer explanations of his conduct or of any circumstances of suspicion which might attach to him. It was his duty, however, to remark that if an accused person refused such explanation, where a strong *primâ facie* case had been made out against him, it must necessarily raise a presumption that his silence arose from guilty or sinister motives. Could common sense do otherwise than adopt this conclusion, especially when, as in the present case, it was manifest that facts inaccessible to the prosecution were in the power of the accused? Mr. Durant, it was proved, did on the second day of August cross from Morteville to London in the company of a lady. By the testimony of his own valet it appeared that he was left alone with this lady between eight and nine o'clock at the South-Eastern Terminus; and at ten o'clock, a

quarter of an hour only before Margaret Hall's death took place, it would be shown that he was once more seen standing by her side on London Bridge.

"And now, with respect to this lady," exclaimed Mr. Sleek, with sudden fervour, "I have a question to ask which I am certain must address itself with irresistible force to every person in this court. Where is she? If this lady, as it will doubtless be alleged, was not Margaret Hall, but some other person still living and well, is her evidence to be adduced or not on the prisoner's behalf? It may, and doubtless will, be hinted to us that there may be cases in which a man would risk the unmerited punishment of guilt sooner than bring forward a woman's name before the world; but I put it to you, whether the lips of a man charged with the most heinous and cowardly of all crimes could remain so sealed? Nay more, I ask does the woman live who would see an innocent man incur even the imputation of a crime like this sooner than allow the record of her own indiscretion, of her own frailty, to be made public?"

They might be told, he proceeded, that the lady who accompanied Mr. Durant from France did certainly wear this scarlet travelling cloak when she arrived in London, but might yet have transferred it to the deceased during the few minutes that elapsed between the time when she was last seen at Mr. Durant's side and that of Margaret Hall's death. If they accepted this startling assumption, if they for once presumed that any given fact was due, not to criminality, but to untoward accident, they would, certainly, be less inclined towards such a merciful supposition a second time. But, alas! this unhappy victim to adverse coincidences would

call upon them immediately afterwards to give another violent mental wrench favourable to his innocence. A handkerchief, embroidered with Gerald Sydney Durant's initials was found in the woman's breast. It had been well said that the die which is orderly in its sequences may be rightly supposed to be loaded. Every successive circumstance that bore against the prisoner was, it must be remembered, cumulative proof—proof multiplied by hundreds. And when to the foregoing facts was added that of Mr. Durant's hat being found floating near the body of the deceased, it seemed folly to ask them again to receive an arbitrary and separate conclusion instead of the plain cause which could alone account for this overpowering accumulation of dark facts—the prisoner's guilt. With regard, he said, to Mr. Durant's manner at his cousin's chambers, it was not his province now to speak. This conduct might possibly be compatible with innocence if it stood alone, but it must be recollected that it was one of a series of facts which, though small, perhaps, in their individual capacity, did, when grouped together, lead to the irresistible conclusion that the prisoner had secret and guilty knowledge of the girl's death. What motive could have prompted the crime it was unneedful also for him to suggest. A dark drama, an old story of passion, satiety, and neglect, of which this was the closing scene, had doubtless been enacted. He had to do with facts alone; and these were the facts which he was able to present to the bench. They saw in the prisoner a young man overwhelmed with debts which he was utterly powerless to meet unaided. His uncle, Sir John Durant, was the only person to whom he could look for assistance; and his uncle, it was known, not

three weeks ago, had threatened to disinherit him if his reported connection with Margaret Hall proved to be a fact. They next found him alone with the unhappy girl on London Bridge upon the night of her death. They had then the mute and touching evidence of the body itself—the wedding-ring tied around her neck; the handkerchief of Gerald Durant in her breast; and lastly, they had the fact that the prisoner already realised to the full those advantages for which, it might be surmised, the death was accomplished. Whatever benefit of doubt Mr. Durant might be entitled to would, for certain, be amply accorded to him hereafter. He believed himself that the magistrate could come to no other conclusion now than that the case was fraught with suspicions of the gravest character, and that the interests of public justice imperatively demanded that the prisoner should be sent for trial before another and a higher tribunal.

And then Mr. Sleek wiped his crimson face, and sat down. His address had been, intentionally, a short one, for the thermometer stood at ninety-six in the shade; and, in common with every other lawyer present, Mr. Sleek fervently hoped to get the examination over to-day. A great surgeon, recalled by enormous fees, to cut off the limb of an illustrious patient, knows that he will be forced to wait and watch over the result of the operation. With a lawyer, what is done is done. Whether Mr. Sleek or Mr. Slight got the best of it, their work would be finished, their fees paid, the moment the bench had pronounced its judgment upon the prisoner; and a pardonable preference for mountain oxygen to city carbonic acid in August made both of them disposed to be concise. Mr. Sleek's address had

not lasted two hours; Mr. Slight's for certain would not occupy more; and it was now only twelve o'clock. By employing a little happy brevity in cross-examination they might yet be able to have a comfortable dinner together, and start off on their respective journeys—one for the Highlands, the other for the Italian lakes—to-night.

The first witness called was Mrs. Sherborne of Heathcotes, and as she came into the witness-box, making her village curtsy to the usher, whom in her agitation she took for the magistrate at least, her country carriage and open sunburnt face seemed almost to bring a breath of wholesome meadow freshness into the noisome human atmosphere of the court. Her first movement was to look towards the prisoner and cry; her second, upon a mild opening question from the bench, to plunge into wildly irrelevant statements about Sir John's goodness to her husband, and her regret at having to appear against Mr. Gerald, and the love she had always borne to the family at the Court. But a little judicious treatment at the hands of Mr. Sleek soon reduced these symptoms of contumacy, and brought the poor woman to a due sense of the position in which she stood, as an important and accredited witness on the side of the Crown. After giving her evidence as to the identification of Margaret Hall after death, Mrs. Sherborne was desired to tell what she knew about her disappearance in January last, and she had just faltered out a few tearful words as to the note the poor girl had written home, and how it was thought about in the county at the time, when Mr. Slight jumped up and, with a stony face and peremptory voice, interrupted her. They had nothing to do in this court with what

was "thought about" by anybody anywhere. They had to do with Mrs. Sherborne's personal evidence, of which he should be glad to hear rather more than she had at present given them. And then, putting up his double eyeglass and looking at her with a certain expression of disbelief and insolence, that made the modest countrywoman almost ready to drop with shame, Mr. Slight proceeded to cross-question her a little.

"Flighty? strange? No, never! — never saw anything unusual, in any way, in poor Maggie's manner. She was a handsome girl—a skin like snow, gentlemen" (with an apologetic curtsy to the bench), "and eyes and hair like the raven's wing, and a bit set up about it, perhaps, at times; but as honest a girl, and as cool a hand for butter as ever churned. Suitors? Well, for the matter of that, she'd as many suitors as most. In her own class of life? Certainly; whose else class should they be in?" For, in spite of her terror, Mrs. Sherborne had her keen country wits about her still. She was in that witness-box to speak the truth—if truth-telling could do it, to get poor Mr. Gerald out of his trouble. But she was equally there to shield the honour of the girl that was dead and gone, and a subtle woman's instinct had interpreted to her aright the object of Mr. Slight's last question.

"And Margaret Hall accepted none of those suitors of her own class of life, it appears, Mrs. Sherborne? What did she say to the suitors of a class above her own?"

"I can't tell, sir."

"You can't tell. Were gentlemen—unmarried ones —accustomed to come about the farm at Heathcotes

during the time that Margaret Hall was in your employment?"

"Yes, certainly. A many gentlemen used to come to see my husband and me."

"Name those who came oftenest."

Mrs. Sherborne hesitated, and shot a quick appealing glance across towards Gerald. "Sir George Chester used to come when he were down at the Court, sir; and Mr. Robert Dennison, and sometimes Mr. Gerald Durant himself, and——"

"Mrs. Sherborne," exclaimed Mr. Slight, suddenly exchanging his air of bantering encouragement for one of scowling ferocity, "have the goodness to weigh your answers more carefully, and remember this is not a time or place for levity." The poor woman's mouth was contorted, through nervousness, into the ghastly semblance of a smile. "Have you, or have you not, known Mr. Robert Dennison to be frequently alone in the company of Margaret Hall?"

Gerald's lips had continued inviolably sealed as respected his personal knowledge of Robert's marriage with Maggie; but he had never hidden, or sought to hide, from his counsel any of the well-known facts relative to their extreme intimacy. His promise to Robert, his faith with Archie Lovell, were all that he felt himself bound to keep. Quixotic enough to lay aside any legitimate weapon of self-defence, he was not—and Mr. Slight, without any positive knowledge of the truth, suspected enough to be sure that his client had neither been the sole nor the first claimant upon poor Maggie's affection.

"Have you, or have you not, frequently seen

Mr. Dennison alone in the girl's company?" he repeated.

"Well, I have seen him, sir; but not oftener—"

"Keep to what I ask you, Mrs. Sherborne," interrupted Mr. Slight, in a cruel voice, "and leave every other subject alone. You have seen Mr. Dennison in the girl's company. How often?"

"I don't remember, sir," answered Mrs. Sherborne piteously.

"Try to think, if you please. Six times? Ten times?"

"Oh dear, yes," she cried, brightening at having something definite to go upon. "The young gentlemen used to walk down Heathcotes way after their dinner, one one time, perhaps, and one another, and then Maggie she'd walk a bit with them in the garden or round the orchard while they smoked their cigars. I'd known both of them from boys, gentlemen," she added, turning towards the magistrate, with her good, brown face softening all over, "and never gave a thought—me or my husband either—that harm would come of it."

"No more with one than with the other, I suppose, Mrs. Sherborne?" put in Mr. Slight, blandly.

"No, sir."

"Exactly!" and Mr. Slight sat down. The evidence for the prosecution had assuredly not done much damage to his client's cause as yet.

At the appearance of the next witness who entered the box Gerald half rose, and leaned forward with an expression of greater eagerness than his face had worn before. The witness was Captain Waters, and as his

eyes met the prisoner's a certain veiled look of intelligence passed for a second between them.

The man had got his hush-money, but—was he safe? was Gerald's uneasy thought, for at his direction a goodly sum had been paid anonymously to Waters, with sternest injunctions never to molest Miss Lovell, or seek in any way to bring her name forward while he lived. The scoundrel had received his bribe, but how was he to know that another man had not meanwhile bid a higher price over his head?

"You may be perfectly at your ease, my infatuated but chivalrous young friend," was Waters' reflection, as he caught sight of Gerald's eager face. "No fear of my killing the goose that lays such very golden eggs! If you are committed for your trial, as you certainly will be, I shall have an income safe without work or trouble for the next six months—a small annuity perhaps for life!"

And then, in his accustomed bored languid tone, Captain Waters, or Edward Randall, as his name was written in the police-sheet, gave his evidence. Had stayed in the same hotel with Mr. Durant about three weeks ago, at Morteville. Remembered seeing him on board a steamer bound for England from the Calais pier. Had no conception what the name of the steamer was; never remembered the names of steamers—wouldn't Bradshaw tell? It seemed a small vessel, chiefly occupied by persons of the lower class. Believed he spoke to Mr. Durant from the pier—was sure he did, now he thought of it—congratulated him, if he recollected right, on having got away from Morteville. A lady was certainly at Mr. Durant's side—might have had his arm—seldom felt sure enough of anything to

take a positive oath to it. If obliged to bet? Well, would rather say she had not got his arm—couldn't see the object of people going about arm-in-arm on board steamers. The lady was too closely veiled for him to see her face—did not, to the best of his remembrance, wear a red cloak; believed she was in white, but positively declined swearing about articles of female dress. Certainly had seen Mr. Durant in the society of ladies at Morteville. What ladies? Lots of ladies—could it really be expected of him to know their names? Never thought Mr. Durant seemed harder up for money than other men—paid, at all events, what he lost to him at cards. How much? Well, a very trifling sum; between a hundred and a hundred and fifty pounds, he should say.

This was Captain Waters' evidence; and it was to be remarked that he was not cross-questioned or meddled with in any way by Mr. Slight while he gave it. The next name called was that of Sophia Dawson. A rumour had got abroad that the evidence of this witness was to be of the most fatal importance as regarded Gerald; and a silence, such as hushes the opera house when some great actress plays the Bridge scene in *Somnambula*, prevailed through the court during her examination. She was, she stated, the wife of Mr. Alfred Dawson, merchant, of the city of London, and on the second of the present month returned to England from a visit that she had been paying to her sister in Paris. She happened to miss the mail in the morning and crossed by the Lord of the Isles, an excursion steamer that left Morteville at two in the afternoon. Soon after getting clear of Calais the wind rose fresh, and as she, witness, felt ill, and was going down to

the cabin, she offered her cloak to a young girl whom she saw sitting in a thin summer dress upon the deck. Yes; the cloak produced (a thrill of satisfaction seemed to run through the expectant crowd at sight of it!) was hers. The colour was stained and altered, but she was positive as to its being the cloak she lent to the girl on board the steamer. Her initials were marked on a piece of tape stitched inside the collar. She would know it, even without these initials, among a hundred cloaks. It was home made, and she had cut out the hood and put it together herself. Saw no more of the girl till they came up the river, and then found her sitting on deck in the company of the same gentleman with whom she had first noticed her off the coast of France. That gentleman was she could swear the prisoner at the bar—but the woman's kindly face here paled visibly as Gerald turned and looked at her full. Knew at the time that his name was Durant; read it on a valise that his servant carried in his hand. Told the girl she might keep the cloak on still, as the air was fresh coming up the river, and when they reached London Bridge forgot all about it in the hurry of landing, and did not see the lady or gentleman again. The cloak was of no great value, and she had never made any inquiries about its loss. Had forgotten all about it until a few days ago, when an advertisement in *The Times* was pointed out to her by a friend. This advertisement was addressed to the lady who lost a scarlet cloak on board the Lord of the Isles on such a date; and her husband thought it right to communicate at once with the police.

This was her evidence. In cross-examination, very suavely and cautiously conducted by Mr. Slight, Mrs.

Dawson stated, with confidence, that she could swear to the person of the girl to whom she lent her cloak. It was an uncommon face, and she remembered it perfectly. The girl's veil was not over her face when she first spoke to her.

The photographs of Margaret Hall, and of one or two other indifferent persons, were now handed to the witness. She examined them as she was directed to do, under a strong microscope, but would not swear as to whether the portrait of the girl who was with the prisoner was among them or not. Did not think much of photographs herself; never had. Would she swear none of them was the portrait of the girl? No she would not. Declined giving any opinion on the subject. Would swear to her own cloak: would swear to the gentleman. Was positive she could swear to the young lady if she saw her. She had bright blue eyes, long fair hair, and a brown complexion.

The prisoner at this point, leaned anxiously forward, and evidently tried to arrest Mr. Slight's attention. But Mr. Slight either did not, or would not, understand the glance. His client's case was just as weak as it was possible to be already; but whatever could be done to strengthen it, Mr. Slight was determined to do: and this last voluntary statement of Mrs. Dawson's was, he knew, the brightest ray of light that had dawned as yet for the defence.

"Blue eyes and fair hair. You state upon your oath, that the young person to whom you lent your cloak had blue eyes?"

"I do." But here, re-examined by the bench, Mrs. Dawson confessed to having been sea-sick at the time she lent the girl her cloak. Her head was swimming

round; and she saw nothing distinctly. When they got into the river, the girl had put down her veil, and she could not, for certain, say that she had remarked the colour of her eyes then.

"And yet two minutes ago, you positively stated that the young woman's eyes were blue?" exclaimed Mr. Slight, indignantly. "I must really request, madam, that you will recollect the importance of your words. You are not, you know, deciding as to the colour of a new dress, but answering a question upon which a man's life may depend. We have nothing to do in this court with your sea-sickness, or any condition of your bodily frame whatsoever. Do you swear that the young woman to whom you lent your cloak on board the Lord of the Isles had blue eyes? Yes, or no?"

"I swear that she had blue eyes."

"Good. Now, Mrs. Dawson, what was the manner, may I ask, of Mr. Durant to the young person during the voyage? Sea-sick, or not sea-sick, this is a point to which no young married lady"—Mrs. Dawson was forty-five at least—"can ever be blind. Was it your opinion at the time, now, that Mr. Durant and this young person were man and wife?"

But to this question, Mr. Sleek positively objected. The private opinions or deductions of any individual—as his friend, Mr. Slight, with admirable clearness, had reminded them—not being evidence; and the bench confirming this objection, Mr. Slight had to repeat his question in its first form—What was the manner of Mr. Durant to the young person with whom he travelled?

A very polite manner. That, of course. He never

doubted for a moment, that the manner of any gentleman to any lady would be a polite one. Was it a marked manner? the manner of a lover, in short?

Well, no; Mrs. Dawson could not say it was. She thought, at the time, they looked like brother and sister, or, perhaps, two young people gone off for a freak. The girl's manner seemed very good-natured and off-hand with her companion—certainly not the manner of a wife to a husband. And now, having worked round after all to the exact admission that he required, Mr. Slight allowed the witness to leave the box.

The evidence of constable X 22, of the City division of police, was next taken. He was on his beat, he said, on the night of August the second, and remembered seeing a girl and a gentleman standing together on London Bridge, a few minutes before ten o'clock. Saw the gentleman's face as distinct as if it had been broad day, for they were standing talking immediately under a lamp, when he came up, and he stopped a minute to look at them. The prisoner at the bar was the gentleman: identified him about a week ago, when, under Mr. Wickham's directions, he watched him from an opposite window at his lodgings at Clarges Street. Thought on the night of the second they must be foreigners, from their queer appearance—the lady was, he described, in a scarlet travelling-cloak; the gentleman without a hat. Thought there seemed some kind of discussion going on between them. There had been a disturbance (this in cross-examination) on the bridge just before; but couldn't say if the prisoner had been mixed up in it or not.

One of the lightermen who first raised the alarm

on the night of the second was now brought forward. The clocks had gone the quarter, he said, about four or five minutes before. Could take his Bible oath he was right as to time. It was his turn to go ashore at half-past ten; and he had been counting the different quarters as they struck. It was a clear night, and he was sitting smoking his pipe on deck, when he heard a woman's shriek, and immediately afterwards saw the splash of some heavy object, close alongside, it seemed, of where the barge was moored. Was not present when the body was found. He and his mate gave the alarm at once; and went ashore as usual at the half-hour.

Lengthened medical evidence came next from the doctors who had before appeared at the inquest, and who still held conflicting opinions as to what had been the immediate cause of death, and whether death had or had not taken place before the body reached the water. After this—science having been apathetically listened to by the experienced trial-goers as a sort of interlude, or by-play, not bearing upon the general interest of the plot—the testimony of the river police, with its accustomed burthen of dark horrors, was recorded; and then—

Then, every man and woman in that dense crowd pressing breathlessly forward to catch a sight of him, Mr. Robert Dennison was summoned to take his place in the witness-box.

His face wore a cadaverous yellow hue—the hue of a man who has newly passed through some sharp bodily pain or sickness; but still the dark eyes kept their counsel inviolate as ever: still not a quiver of the

lips betrayed either fear or weakness to any who were watching him. As soon as he appeared, Gerald Durant leant forward, upon his clasped arms, over the ledge of the dock, fixing his eyes steadfastly upon his cousin's face: and so for a few silent moments they stood—the guilty man and the innocent one—confronting each other. This was perhaps the strongest situation in the whole morning's performance; and a good many of the ladies present raised their handkerchiefs to their eyes. The sympathies of the common people were, here as throughout, upon Gerald Durant's side. The educated and refined few were naturally alive to the pathos of poor Mr. Dennison's position; the intense suffering with which this duty of giving evidence against one so near akin to him as the prisoner must be performed.

He was examined by Mr. Sleek, and stated that he was first cousin to Gerald Durant, and had been on terms of intimacy and affection with him all his life. On the first of the present month he parted from his cousin at Morteville. Did not know that he was in particular money difficulties at the time; was about the same in that respect as most young men of his profession and age. An estrangement had certainly existed between Gerald and his uncle, Sir John Durant. Saw his cousin next on the night of the following day, August the second. On that occasion witness had a party of friends dining with him in his chambers, and towards midnight Gerald Durant unexpectedly came in. He was dressed in a morning suit, and explained that he had only arrived in London that evening by a steamer from France. Did not recollect anything unusual in his appearance: was unable to say whether he had a hat with him or not. Admitted—and that the

admission cost him dear no one looking at Robert Dennison's face, his bloodless lips, the great drops standing upon his livid forehead, could doubt—that the prisoner had made some allusion to having been on London Bridge that night: did not remember the exact words the prisoner used.

MR. SLEEK: "I must beg of you to recollect them, Mr. Dennison. The prosecution has every wish to spare the feelings of you and of your family to the uttermost, but this is a most important part of the evidence, and cannot be slurred over."

And thus adjured—and with Gerald's eyes upon him still!—Mr. Dennison spoke. As the evening progressed, and as some of the guests were preparing to leave, Gerald Durant asked him what old friend he imagined he had seen that night on London Bridge. Witness answered that he did not know; and Gerald Durant then went on to say that he had seen a Staffordshire face they both knew, or one so like it as to be its ghost, crouching out of sight in one of the recesses of London Bridge. Witness treated the remark lightly at the time, not knowing any Staffordshire person who would be likely to be seen in such a position. Thought, and still believed, it to be meant as a joke. Parted that night on friendly terms with his cousin, and had not seen him since. Had held no communication with Mr. Durant since his arrest.

All this portion of Robert Dennison's deposition could be scarcely more than guessed at in the court, for he spoke in an excessively low key, and with a voice that trembled either with feigned or unfeigned agitation. But as soon as Mr. Slight commenced his cross-examination, Mr. Dennison was forced, agitated

or not, to be audible. No one knew better how to affect occasional deafness than Mr. Slight. No one knew better than Mr. Slight the effect upon some witnesses of being forced to speak out in a tone that the whole court could hear.

"You parted from the prisoner at Morteville on August the first. Will you inform the Court, Mr. Dennison, as to the nature of your business in Morteville at that particular time?"

"I had no business there at all. I was on my way back from Paris to London."

"Ah! And what had been your business in Paris, Mr. Dennison? Be careful."

"I decline answering the question."

"Were you in the company of the same lady with whom you visited Paris in January or February last?"

"I decline entering into my private affairs at all."

"Very well, sir," cried out Mr. Slight, with sudden deadly animosity, "then there is one question which this Court will oblige you to answer, whether it suits your convenience or not. What was the nature of your conversation with Mr. Gerald Durant on the morning you left Morteville?—the conversation you held together on the subject of Margaret Hall?"

Robert Dennison's face grew, if possible, a shade more livid. "I—I do not understand you," he stammered; but the moment's hesitation gave his brain time to work. Either Gerald had betrayed him, and fullest exposure was coming on, or Mr. Slight was fencing with such weapons only as his client's half-confidence had supplied to him. In either case his quick presence of mind counselled him to answer with honesty. Could a

lie have saved him he would have told it—yes, in the face of a hundred newly-uttered oaths; but the time, he knew, was gone for denial of any kind. Truth, plain and literal, was what he was reduced to now; and, boldly-faithful as he was boldly-false, Robert Dennison stood, the first momentary irresolution over, prepared to tell it.

As he stood thus—no abasement in his eyes, no tremble on his lips, no token of fear on all the iron face—Gerald felt that he admired Dennison as he had never admired him in his life before. Talk of pluck! why his own was nothing, for he was innocent. But here was a man guilty of actions which in every class of society are branded as infamous—betrayal of the woman who bore his name, darkest dishonour in allowing another man to abide the consequences of his act; and, in a moment, for aught that he could know, the fair reputation he set such store upon might be spotted—fame, money, position, every dearest hope of his life, attained. And he stood and waited for the blow thus! I repeat, Gerald in his heart admired him, as one admires the brutal heroes of the ring, for his sheer blind animal strength, unleavened though it was by any of the moral qualities which raise a nobler man's courage above the courage of a bull-dog. The stamina of the Durants was there, he thought. The poor fellow's inadequate sense of finer honour was to be credited more perhaps to the base admixture of Dennison blood than to any fault of his. *Bon sang ne peut pas mentir*. There was no virtue in *his* ever acting like a gentleman; but how can you expect a man without a grandfather to know how to conduct himself decently? When they were boys together, nice delicacy,

even with respect to half-crowns, was, he remembered, the one thing he had never looked for in his roturier cousin. It was the same now. But the good blood showed in the fellow's face and attitude at this moment; and Gerald's heart, his fancy—what was it that fired so easily in that facile organisation? warmed towards him.

"You don't understand me," said Mr. Slight, "yet the question is a simple one. Can you remember the substance of the conversation that took place between you and your cousin on the morning of your leaving Morteville?"

"I can remember the general tenour of it, certainly," said Dennison, firmly. "The subject of Margaret Hall's continued disappearance was talked of, and I advised Mr. Durant to return to England at once, and endeavour to prove his innocence in the matter. Suspicions had arisen as to his being the companion of the girl's flight, and I wished him to set himself right with his friends at once."

"And what was your cousin's answer to this excellent advice?"

"My cousin's answer was, that he had perfect confidence in his innocence eventually asserting itself. As for suspicions, he believed they had been very much stronger against myself than against him."

"To which you replied—"

"In words that I cannot consider it necessary to repeat here," said Dennison, with admirable audacity. "I decline, as I have observed, to enter at all upon my own personal affairs."

Mr. Slight's eyeglass fell; and he shifted his ground a little.

"Have you ever stated your conviction to be that Gerald Durant was Margaret Hall's lover, and that you had good reasons for saying so?"

"Not in those words, certainly."

"Did you state once to Mr. Sholto McIvor that you believed Gerald Durant had got into a mess with his uncle about Margaret Hall?"

"I may have said so. I don't recollect it."

"Have you endeavoured to set right the misunderstanding that you say existed between the prisoner and his uncle?"

"I have."

"Mr. Dennison," with an abrupt emphasis that took every one in the court aback, "are you—failing the prisoner at the bar—Sir John Durant's next male heir?"

The inflection of Mr. Slight's voice as he said this was something wonderful. Robert Dennison's heart stood still at the terse embodiment of his own guilty hopes which those few words, spoken in that tone, put before him. But rallying instantly, with thorough self-command, with a face of marble to the last, he answered coldly that he was not and never could be Sir John Durant's heir. And then—a sound, not exactly a hiss, but a sound decidedly the reverse of applause following him from the court—Mr. Dennison was allowed to leave the witness-box, and poor little Sholto McIvor was called to take his place there.

At no time wise or eloquent, Sholto was, on this most memorable day of his life, a very monument of helpless, well-meaning, total imbecility. He contradicted himself; he made statements *à tort et à travers*; he remembered what he ought to have forgotten; forgot

what he ought to have remembered; and was alternately browbeaten by the defence, reprimanded for contempt of court by the magistrate, and reminded of the stringency of the law against perjury by the prosecution. But bullied by the lawyers, and laughed at by the whole court, Gerald included, he succeeded in creating a stronger impression against the prisoner than any witness had yet done. ("Did your best to hang me," Gerald tells him to this day.) He was so wholly, so palpably guileless, it was so evident that his sympathies were on the prisoner's side, that every admission wrung from him seemed to carry the kind of weight with it that men are prone to accord to the evidence of a child. The description of Gerald's manner and appearance when he entered his cousin's chambers; his altercation with Dennison; the "chaff" about some lady at Morteville; Gerald's voluntary admission that he had seen "the ghost of a Staffordshire face" on London Bridge; his unusual taciturnity as they drove home together to their lodgings in Clarges Street—every word that Sholto uttered told. And immense was the success of this part of the entertainment among the higher class of spectators. With a thermometer at ninety-six, and such air to breathe as a London police-court generates, the nerves require relaxation after three or four hours heavy business, even with the prospect of seeing a guardsman committed to Newgate, to carry one's interest on.

When he had said his worst on the subject of the dinner-party, Sholto was questioned as to Gerald's money difficulties, and again did him simply as much damage as was possible. Hard up? Of course, Durant had always been deucedly hard up, like everybody else.

First heard of his coolness with his uncle from Mr. Dennison. What was it about? . . . Would like to know whose business that was. Well, then—the bench having sternly interfered—it was about a woman, this wretched, ridiculous milkwoman, Margaret Hall. What did Sir John Durant threaten? Why, to disinherit him, he supposed. Thought that was what “uncles and governors and that” always threatened. During the last three weeks Durant had come right with his people again. Knew it because he had written and asked him, Sholto, to be his best man at his approaching marriage with his cousin. Did they want any better proof than that?

After Sholto, appeared Mr. Bennett; all his elegant language taken out of him, and covered with shame and contrition at having to appear against his master. He had very little to tell, and that little was terribly in favour of the prosecution. He returned with Mr. Durant, on August the second, from a tour they had been making abroad; stopped a few days in Paris, and no lady was with his master then. Saw his master two or three times in a lady's society at Morteville; she crossed to London in the Lord of the Isles with them. Saw that she wore a scarlet cloak during the latter part of the voyage; took up lunch to her and Mr. Durant on the paddle-box, and got out one of his master's cambric handkerchiefs for the lady to tie round her head. Yes; the handkerchief shown him was the same; knew it by his master's monogram—called by Mr. Bennett monograph. The hat produced was the kind of hat Mr. Durant travelled in, but declined swearing to it. At the London Bridge station his master dismissed him with the luggage, and he left them stand-

ing there together, Mr. Durant and the lady. His master returned home between one and two o'clock; one of the sides of his coat was much torn; he did not bring any hat home with him. Did not know the lady's name (this was in answer to Mr. Slight). Had only lived with Mr. Durant four months, and to the best of his belief never saw Margaret Hall in his life.

Then—the formal, official evidence of Mr. Wickham having occupied a very few minutes only—it was announced that there would be a brief adjournment of the court, and that the case for the prosecution was closed.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Here!"

EVERY one present detected a marked and significant change upon Mr. Slight's face when the court reassembled, and whispers of good augury for the coming defence were at once passed about among the lawyers. It was already known how, immediately after the adjournment, Sir John Durant, accompanied by a young girl, had arrived and had an interview with Mr. Slight; and how, on re-entering the court, Mr. Slight had crossed at once to the dock and held an earnest whispered conversation with his client. It was remarked, how Gerald Durant's face flushed and paled as they spoke; how at first he had appeared eagerly to oppose some proposition that was being made to him, afterwards—Mr. Slight's expression brightening every moment—how an unwilling assent had evidently been wrung from his lips. And putting all these things together, an opinion of good omen for the prisoner was, as I have said, fast gaining ground in the court. Old Slight would not look so ridiculously pleased without solid cause. Some new and important evidence was probably coming to light, at the eleventh hour, for the defence.

The face of the lawyer for the Crown grew ominously long at the thought. As the case already stood, they had calculated upon getting it over, with half an hour or so to spare, before dinner-time. One witness more, on either side, might just make the difference of

an adjournment till next day; above all, a witness of sufficient importance to make Slight look so foolishly excited. And, with a pathetic yearning for the twenty-four hours of blue Italian lake and pure Italian sky that he would be called upon to resign, Mr. Sleek, like every person present in a state bordering on asphyxia, loosened his cravat, leant back with half-closed eyes in his seat, and prepared himself for the worst.

The first welcome sound that fell on his ear was an announcement that the address made on the prisoner's behalf would be a very brief one. It had never, of course, Mr. Slight remarked, been his intention to assert that this client was innocent of the horrible crime laid to his charge. He had not been summoned to his present position to assert Mr. Durant's innocence; innocence, according to all civilised laws, being a thing to be presumed—criminality never; and the burthen of proof, as it was unnecessary for him to say, resting always with the prosecution. In a case of purely circumstantial evidence like this, if the facts adduced were capable of solution upon any other hypothesis than the guilt of the accused, they must be discarded: nay, although the matter remained so wholly mysterious that no supposition save the prisoner's guilt could account for it, that supposition would not be basis sufficient on which to rest a judgment against him. Before committing Gerald Durant for trial for the murder of Margaret Hall, the bench must be as morally convinced, by the chain of evidence brought forward, that he was guilty, as though they had seen him commit the act under their own eyes. That chain of evidence, he positively affirmed, had never existed; indeed, he did not hesitate to say that the counsel for the Crown were re-

versing every legal and customary mode of proceeding. Instead of proving a murder first and discovering the murderer afterwards, they were seeking first to prove the murderer and thence to deduce a murder! It had never, he repeated, been his intention to assert his client's innocence; but, until a quarter of an hour ago, he had certainly intended to point out, link by link, the palpable weakness of the attempt to prove his guilt: had meant to show how revolting to probability, how surrounded at every step with contradiction, was the presumption of a murder; while, on the other hand, if they yielded to the supposition of suicide, how every fact could at once be explained, naturally, and without distortion.

"The necessity for my doing this, however," cried Mr. Slight, "is now happily removed. I have no longer to allude to the paucity of proof that a murder was ever committed at all; to the difficulty, I may say impossibility, of such an act of violence having taken place unobserved in one of the most crowded thoroughfares of London; to the discrepancy between the person of Mr. Durant's companion and the person of the deceased; to mysterious circumstances respecting which a feeling of honour may have caused the prisoner's lips to be sealed. My esteemed friend who conducts the prosecution"—here he put up his eyeglass and took a glance at Mr. Sleek's hot face—"has proved to us that a lady dressed in a scarlet travelling cloak did, on the second night of August, cross London Bridge with Mr. Gerald Durant. This fact it is impossible for me to deny. But my esteemed friend also added that, with regard to this lady, he had a question to ask; a question which he knew must address itself with irresistible

force to every person in the court—"Where is she?" And to this question," went on Mr. Slight, speaking in a voice so distinct that not a syllable was lost throughout the whole silent crowd, "I have one brief and simple answer to make—Here! Here—waiting to be brought into the witness-box and to prove to the bench, with certainty unimpeachable, the innocence of the accused! At twenty minutes past ten on the night of August the second, the death of Margaret Hall, according to the evidence of witnesses for the prosecution, took place. At twenty minutes past ten, Gerald Durant stood beside the lady whom I am now going to bring before you, on the platform of the South Eastern Railway, at London Bridge."

A smothered exclamation, half of approval, half of sheer stupefied surprise, burst from the crowd. Perhaps it would not be too much to say that an unacknowledged sense of disappointment did, for a moment, cross the minds of most of the spectators of the play: the kind of feeling people have when a fire is put out sooner than was expected, or when an impending fight ends unexpectedly in the combatants seeing their error and shaking hands. No one wanted Gerald Durant to be hung, or even committed, as far as he, poor fellow, was individually concerned. But every one who had fought his or her way into the court, every one who had gone through the heat and burthen of the day, did expect some good strong sensation as the reward of their sufferings. And the proving of an alibi—even with a young and pretty woman in the witness-box—could never be one half so sensational an incident as to see a handsome guardsman, the heir

of an old unsullied name, committed for trial, and borne away to Newgate like any common felon.

This was the first feeling of the coarser crowd; but in one breast in that court a feeling, almost tragic in its intensity, of disappointment had arisen at Mr. Slight's last words. Mr. Wickham, his face unmoved as ever, was standing edgeways in one of the crowded entrances to the court, listening with the indifference engendered by long habit to the little stereotyped preamble about the certainty of the prisoner's innocence, when that one awfully distinct monosyllable, "Here," broke in upon his senses; and in a moment, mechanical though his attention had been, he recalled the drift of Mr. Slight's whole address, and understood its meaning. The defence was going to prove an alibi. Mr. Wickham in his inmost soul staggered as if he had got a death-stroke. An alibi! He was like a man to whom a flaw in his noblest belief, his dearest affection, has been unexpectedly discovered; like the *chef* whose wounded spirit could not survive the disgrace of that one spoilt salmi! The London Bridge case had been the culminating triumph of Mr. Wickham's life. He had received the compliments of those high in office, had awakened the jealousy of his peers, by the way in which he had worked that case up. The remembrance of it was to have been the solace of his superannuated years, an honourable heirloom to leave to his children after him. And here, in a moment, through some paltry miscalculation, some miserable lawyer's sleight-of-hand, his crown was to be wrested from him by an alibi. Any other defeat he thought he might have borne better, but—an alibi! An alibi, cooked up at the last; an alibi

which, if established—and something on Mr. Slight's face left little ground for hope that the defence was a sham—would turn the whole prosecution into a ridiculous mistake, and reduce the very name of Wickham into a reproach and a by-word in the profession.

Circumstances unnecessary to dilate upon, proceeded Mr. Slight's cheerful voice, had conspired together to hinder this most important witness for the defence from appearing until the last moment; and it was doubtless a painful reflection for the officers of the Crown to feel that, had a longer delay occurred, a committal condemning an innocent man to imprisonment, and casting a stigma upon a loyal and unspotted name, would have been the result of the spirit in which the prosecution has been conducted. Happily, providentially, all danger of this fearful injustice was past; and the welcome duty that now lay before the bench was the restoration of an honourable man, without suspicion, without the faintest stain of any kind upon his character, to his position and his friends.

A long low murmur, a murmur of intense, irrepressible excitement, passed for a minute or two through the court, then slowly the door of the witness-box opened, and a girl appeared there; a girl dressed in white, with long hair falling round her neck, with a child's freshness on her lips and in her eyes; the fairest apparition that had brightened those unlovely walls any time during the last five and twenty years at least. She moved a step or two forward, with the uncertain reeling movement of one who walks in his sleep, then shrank away against the side of the witness-box, and—a frightful pallor gathering round her lips—looked with bewildered eyes about her.

"Your name?" said Mr. Slight, unconsciously modulating his voice to the tone he would have used had he been seeking to reassure a very frightened child. "What is your name? Now take time to recover yourself."

She started and clasped her hands together, with the little foreign gesture so painfully familiar to the eyes of two men who were watching her in that court; but though her lips parted, no sound as yet reached the impatient ears of the crowd; and for the third time, with ever-increasing gentleness and encouragement, Mr. Slight repeated his question.

Just at this moment a ray of sunshine struggled in through one of the high barred windows of the court, and falling, as it chanced, straight across the prisoner's dock, brought out, in fullest golden relief, the pale and eager face of Gerald Durant. At the sight of him a wonderful, sudden light rose in the girl's eyes. She stood a second or more motionless; a scarlet flood rushing across her cheeks and forehead; then stepped forward, and in a clear vibrating voice—a voice which for an instant touched the heart even of that police-court crowd—gave her answer:

"Archie Lovell."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Archie's Ovation.

FROM the moment that she left the Euston Square Station until now, Archie Lovell had realised nothing of what was going on around her. The drive along the noisy city streets; the crowded entrance of the court; the room where she had had her interview with Mr. Slight; the passages along which they had led her next; the door through which some voice had bade her pass; the moment when she found herself in that sickening atmosphere, before that pale and surging mass of human faces:—of all this she had taken note accurately, as far as external detail went, but with no more vivid sense of its connection with herself than if it had been the shifting, unreal background of a dream. Until the moment when she saw Gerald, it seemed as though some one else were really acting out for her the final scene of her sacrifice, and as though she were being carried blindly along in it, a mere passive, stupefied spectator. Then in one sudden, mighty wave, swept back across her brain the meaning, the purpose, the present shame, the future penalty, of all this that she was doing. She was neither dreaming nor at play—the two states that had compassed every act of her little life till now. An innocent man was standing before her, charged with a crime from which, no matter at what price, her duty was to save him; and she had got to speak the truth—this Mr. Slight had told her

—nothing but the truth and to fear no one, not even the magistrate upon the bench, but answer soberly and faithfully whatever questions were put to her. She clenched her fingers firmly upon the palms of her hands; held her breath tight; felt herself blinded by a dark red mist that for a second swam before her sight; then rallied every faculty she possessed in one desperate effort, and told her name. After this Mr. Slight at once began her examination, and throughout it all she kept her head erect and spoke out clear, cool, and undaunted, just as she had spoken when she was eleven years old, saving Tino from Bettina's wrath. The sea of faces before which she had shrunk with the mere animal terror that overcomes any one for the first time confronting a crowd, seemed to lessen and fade away, and in its place she saw two faces only; Mr. Slight's, who questioned her, and Gerald's—his whom she was here to save. What was there to make her fear or falter now?

She was seventeen on the twelfth of last October. Her father was the Honourable Frederick Lovell, Rector of Hatton, in Staffordshire. First knew Mr. Durant about four weeks ago, in Morteville-sur-Mer. "I met him a few times on the Grève, and went to a ball, and danced with him; I think I knew him very well. On the second of August, Mr. Durant left Morteville, and I went down on the pier to see him off. Papa and Bettina were away from home, and the servant too, and no one knew I went. I wanted to see a steamer, and asked Mr. Durant to take me on board with him. He took me, and the boatman was stupid and left me there, and before we knew where we were, the steamer had started, and the captain wouldn't stop. Mr. Du-

rant was very sorry about it, and said I should land at Calais, and get back by another boat to Morteville; but when we reached Calais, there were a number of people I knew standing on the pier, and I was ashamed to land among them—so we came on to London. It wasn't Mr. Durant's fault more than mine. I ought to have landed at Calais, but I was ashamed . . . at all events, we went on! I liked being at sea. I liked being with Mr. Durant—*ecco!* The wind was fresh going across, and a lady on deck lent me her cloak. It was a scarlet cloak; I should know it if I saw it again. Yes," after examining the cloak which was handed to her, "this is the same. It is changed in colour, I think; it looks as if it had been in the water. When we got to London I was confused in the great crowd, and forgot to return the cloak—I meant no robbery, I only forgot it. We went to a station, Mr. Durant and I, and had some tea; then he took me for a walk on London Bridge. Mr. Durant asked me to drive with him and see the streets, but I was afraid there wouldn't be time before the train left, so we walked instead. I was to go back to Folkestone by the half-past ten train. When we were on the bridge, a crowd got round us, and in the *zuffa* I lost Mr. Durant's arm. Some men molested me because I spoke Italian, I think, and Mr. Durant knocked one of them down. The man bled and looked hurt, and then Mr. Durant's coat got torn, and his hat was lost. It was a peaked hat, such as I have seen the peasants wear in the Tyrol. The hat you show me is like it—how can I swear it is the same?—it is like it. Then came the *polizia*—police, you say—and sent the crowd away. One of the police stopped and looked at Mr. Durant and me. He said

nothing, but he looked at us hard. Am I to know if he saw my face? We walked on over the bridge and crossed, so as to see the other side of London, on our way back. As we came, I saw a woman in one of the little *angoli* on the bridge. Recesses? well, then, in one of the recesses. She was thinly dressed, and was sitting with her head leaning against the wall. I thought she was ill, and asked Mr. Durant to let me give her the cloak. I don't say that it was out of kindness, it was, chiefly, I think, because I wanted to get rid of the cloak—I should have been ashamed to land in it 'at Morteville. Mr. Durant said no, I shouldn't give it her, but I had my way, and went up and spoke to the woman. I saw her face, plain. Mr. Durant stood a few steps away. I can't tell whether he saw her—I should think not—he may have had a glimpse of her, . . . I would rather you asked me questions about myself! She was young, and good looking—about twenty, perhaps, with pale skin, and black hair and eyebrows. I remember her quite well. I saw her hands: they did not look like a lady's hands. I asked her if she would take the cloak, and when she didn't speak, I put it round her and fastened it at the throat. She tried to answer then, but there was something thick and strange about the way she spoke, and I did not understand her. I don't know what was the matter with her—how should I? I believe I left a handkerchief of Mr. Durant's in the pocket of the cloak. The handkerchief you show me is exactly like it: I tell by the *batiste*, and the lilac stitching round the letters. I can't swear that it is the same: a whole set of handkerchiefs might be marked the same. Just after we were walking on again, the clocks in London struck

one—that was a quarter-past ten, Mr. Durant told me, and we must get on quick. The train I went by left at half-past ten, and Mr. Durant stayed by the carriage where I was till the last. I heard no clocks strike: I heard the conductor say we were five minutes behind our time. Then I went away home. I got to Morteville very early in the morning, and no one I knew, except Captain Waters, saw me land on the pier. Papa did not return home till the middle of the day. I have never told him anything about my going to London. I told my stepmother about it the same afternoon, and she said I must never talk of it to any one. I never should have told, but for this: when Mr. Durant was first taken up, I did not mean to tell. I don't know whether I thought he would get clear without me: I know I did not mean to tell. I was at Durant's Court when some one came to take him to London, and Mr. Durant told me then to keep silent, whatever happened, and he would never betray me. I had not made up my mind to tell till last night. I don't know what decided me. I never spoke to Bet-tina, or to papa about coming. Mr. Gerald Durant is engaged to marry his cousin Lucia. He was never engaged to me. No; it is certainly not for Miss Durant's sake that I have told the truth: I care very little about her . . . I cannot answer you. I don't know why I have told it."

And here Mr. Slight stopped; and, by order of the magistrate, Mrs. Dawson was recalled into the witness-box.

At the sight of the girl who stood there—the resurrection, as it seemed to her, of the dead—dressed exactly as she had seen her that day, on the deck of

the Lord of the Isles, Mrs. Dawson gave a start and a half-scream that, before she had uttered a word, bore incontestable evidence to the truth of all Archie Lovell had said. Did she know the young lady at her side? Ay, indeed she did: could not be surer if it was her own daughter she had to answer to. This was Mr. Durant's companion—the girl to whom she lent the cloak on board the steamer. Would swear most positively to it on oath. It was not a face likely to be forgotten. Told the Court in her evidence—with a look of triumph at both lawyers—that the young lady had light brown hair, and blue eyes. Could not help it if she had been “that cross-questioned and mortified” at the time, as to make her hardly know herself which way she was swearing. Mr. Slight now wrote something on a slip of paper, which was handed by one of the officers of the court to the magistrate; and a minute or two later—Archie standing there still—“Mr. Edward Randall” was re-summoned to take his place in the witness-box.

If ever a man on earth was placed in a position likely to end in a committal for perjury, it was Captain Waters at this moment: and he read his danger at a glance. His threats to Archie, the anonymous bribe to silence that he had accepted, the truths which two hours before he had in this court suppressed—every detail of his situation came clear before his mind with his first hurried look at Archie Lovell's face. Some melodramatic outburst of generosity had brought the girl forward after all; and (following the law by which innocence and virtue are ever trampled upon in this world) he was to be the sufferer. And he put up his eye-glass calmly; stroked down his blonde moustache

with his delicate, paste-decked fingers, and looked round at the magistrate, lawyers, and the rest, just in the same quiet, unmoved way with which he was accustomed to read the faces of the adversary, and the adversary's gallery at *écarté*. He had not much to lose—even in such a moment as this the thought crossed Waters' mind. To some men, a conviction for perjury, might be the loss of friends, reputation, ambition, money: to him it would be—what? Not even the loss which, to his judgment, seemed immeasurably the most important in the scale, money. Imprisonment cost one nothing, and was no greater bore than liberty; nay, as he knew from experience, it sent a man back, sometimes, with nerves strengthened by early hours, and abstinence from tobacco, to the accustomed duties of his life. If the worst came to the worst, he would still, at the end of a few months, more or less, be the exact amount of money which he had received from Gerald Durant to the good. The game had been well played; and, whether the last deal went against him or not, he had the calm assurance of his own conscience to tell him that he had reckoned up the odds with accuracy.

And he came admirably through it all! Came through it as it is very doubtful that a better man would have done. Perhaps the season of the year, and the unparalleled heat of this particular day, may have been the chosen instruments by which the gods of Captain Waters' faith saw fit to deliver him. With a city court-house at ninety-six, in August, few magistrates or lawyers would seek to protract their own suffering by probing the exactitude of a comparatively unimportant witness too narrowly. Skimming

lightly, and with delicate adroitness, over the Calais episode, Mr. Slight extracted an admission from the witness, that he had seen Miss Lovell, the young lady who stood beside him now, land alone at Morteville, on the morning of August the third. And after this, without a word of cross-examination, Captain Waters passed away out of the witness-box; passed away, too, for ever out of the record of Archie Lovell's life.

[That I may not have to stain the last and fairest chapter of my story by the mention of him, I will say here that he was seen last autumn at Homburg; a jewelled chevalier of industry no longer, but one of the scantily-paid servants of the public tables; in which capacity—unless ill-health should chance to bring him lower still—his life will probably be passed. Paralysis, the Nemesis of such men, seized Waters within a few months of the day of Gerald's trial; and taking from him nerve, memory, power of combination—the mental stock-in-trade of his craft—left him just bodily strength enough to fulfil the duties of a croupier. Ralph Seton was the man who saw him thus at Homburg; and at the pitying request of a soft voice at his side: managed to slip a napoleon or two into the sickly attenuated hand, not engaged at the moment with the professional rateau: a kindness which, coming from the source it did, made something very like tears rise into the poor wretch's eyes. "And which shows he is not altogether worthless," the soft voice said to Ralph, when they came out from the crowded Kur Saal into the blue German night. "No man, unless he had some good left in him, would be touched by a kindness!" A purely womanly inference,

which Ralph would not for worlds have shattered by remarking how a scoundrel brought, by smoking and alcohol, to the state of Waters, will shed tears of maudlin gratitude over your charity at one moment, and betray or revile the hand that has assisted him at the next!]

The examination was virtually over. Already the crowd was beginning to move; already the lawyers for the crown, and for the defence, indifferently, were congratulating each other, with brightened faces, upon the termination in one day of the inquiry. In a few emphatic words, the magistrate then pronounced the discharge of the prisoner, "without a blot, or the suspicion of a blot, upon his honour:" and almost before Archie Lovell, confused and faint, had left the witness-box, a prolonged irrepressible outburst of applause from the court, told her that the work she had set herself to do was accomplished—Gerald Durant free.

In performing any act heroic to ourselves we are apt to gauge the effect it will produce on others by the effect that it produces on our own imagination beforehand. That her future life was to be irrevocably darkened, Archie had never doubted; but that, in the first hour of her victory over self, men would appreciate her heroism she had felt equally sure. In what form this hero-worship would be laid at her feet she had not speculated; she had felt only that it *must* be accorded to her. What was the triumph that she met with in reality? Flushed, weary, bewildered, she found herself, after traversing a dark, noisome room or two, with the other discharged witnesses, among the

crowd—such a crowd as only a disgorging London court can show; a crowd of sallow-faced men and women, whose jokes defiled her ears, whose touch was abhorrent to her; men and women bandying vile police-court jests together, and to whose lips her own name—with what a shudder she heard it there!—was already familiar. Her heart died within her; she shrank back against the black, polluted wall nearest to which she stood, and pulled her veil down over her face. This was her reward, she felt. She had sacrificed the happiness of her whole life freely, and even in the first moment after the accomplishment of the sacrifice, was forgotten. Gerald, Sir John Durant, Ralph Seton, were thinking, joyfully no doubt, of the cause that had been won; and she who had won it was standing here alone—a thousand times worse than alone: was standing among a coarse and cruel crowd, in her shame!

Just at this moment a kind voice whispered in her ear, a friendly hand took hold of hers, and drew it within the shelter of a stalwart, untrembling arm.

“Keep along with me, my dear, and you’ll be all right. There’s my cousin ’Melia’s husband waiting for me down by the steps—the little man with the black hatband—and he’ll get us into a cab, and see us to the station comfortable, if so be that you don’t mind riding with us under the circumstances.”

It was not Gerald, it was not Ralph, but the homely farmer’s wife from Heathcotes who had been the first to come to her succour. With the timely aid of ’Melia’s husband they struggled their way at last through the crowd; and just as Gerald was leaving the court, his friends pressing round to shake his hand and

congratulate him, the poor little heroine of the day, more dead than living, was being driven from its door, with the yells and laughter and brutal jokes of the mob for her ovation.

CHAPTER XIX.

In the Dark Hour.

OF all the conflicting emotions called into play by the unexpected ending of Gerald Durant's examination—from the childish, tearful delight of poor old Sir John, down to the blank professional disappointment of Inspector Wickham, the emotions of Robert Dennison would be, perhaps, the hardest of analysis.

Paradoxical though it may sound, his first sensation was one of positive relief. Was a lurking, human remorse towards Gerald the cause of this? had his quick brain foreseen fresh combinations of possible danger to himself in the event of his cousin's committal? or was it simply the physical reaction which good and bad human creatures alike are sensible of when, after acute mental tension, the end comes, and suspense, at least, is over? Robert Dennison himself could scarcely have answered this as he left the police-court, leaning back out of men's sight in the corner of his cab, and screening away with his hand the bright evening sunshine from his eyes. All he knew was that he felt relieved! that he had exchanged the pestilential air of the court and witness-room for the purer one of the streets, and was returning home now to change his dress, and take his bath before dinner. And then it first occurred to him that he had not swallowed food to-day; had scarcely eaten, had never slept an hour of wholesome sleep during the past week; and

with a childish interest, very unlike himself, Mr. Denison fell to wondering whether he would dine well this evening and on what dishes? and whether, if he went to bed early—by eleven or twelve o'clock, say—there would be a chance of his getting a good night's rest at last? A worn-out brain and empty stomach seldom admit of much grandiloquence in our thoughts or in our sufferings just at first.

He got home, took a couple of glasses of sherry, dressed, went out, and dined; and by eight o'clock had returned to his chambers, and was sitting by that window where he had sat and watched the river on the morning after Maggie's death; the window from whence he had heard the children's voices at the moment when he was nerving himself to look over and destroy the last mute mementos of his dead love for her. Had his love been ever utterly and indeed dead? he asked himself; for now that mere animal exhaustion was passed, memory and remorse had arisen, like giants refreshed, to torture him again. His passionate fancy for her had cooled, of course, as all fancies for beautiful toys cool in possession; and he had wronged her cruelly, and her death, however men might think, lay (and his heart knew it!) at his door. But love—had he not in truth loved her? Would he not at this moment give up years of life could he but feel the warm hand still in his, but see the faithful womanly face looking, as it used to look, in perfect, blissful, slavish contentment up to his? Something within his heart cried yes. Loss of friends and reputation here in England; alienation from his uncle and his uncle's money; the up-hill prospect of making himself another name elsewhere, all these seemed as nothing to him

now. In this hour, this first hour of what he knew was to be in some measure a new life—the common human nature of the man, the weakness on all exemption from which he was wont to pride himself, sheer craving desire for sympathy in his desolation overcame him. The dark heart, as in Herod of old, bled for what it had destroyed; cried out, with vain and passionate regret, for the love that it had murdered.

He had a cigar between his lips when he first placed himself at the window, but it burnt out, and it did not seem to occur to him to light it, or to take another. His servant, as usual, had placed some wine and brandy on the table at his master's side; but Dennison drank nothing. Stimulants, taken even in a quantity that would have set most men's brains perforce to rest, would but have stimulated his to keener thought; and he had the wisdom to abstain from them. God knows he needed no sharpening of his faculties! needed no whetstone for his remorse—no new vividness added to the pictured face that, white and haggard, and with wan, beseeching eyes, seemed to stand before him everywhere—everywhere, in the waning twilight!

It was his first hour of pure, concentrated suffering since Maggie's death, for dread of suspicion resting on himself at first, anxiety later in the result of Gerald's trial, had until now held every other motive in abeyance; and he suffered, as he did most things, with his might, with brains! Good, diffuse, kindly natures, prone to bleed a dozen times a week, can, perhaps, hardly estimate to what extent an intensely selfish man like this softens when three or four times in a life the

flinty heart is smitten, and the floodgates of the soul are loosed.

A little after nine came a ring at his chambers' door. The boy, in obedience to his master's commands, told the visitor, whose face he did not by this light distinguish, that Mr. Dennison had business and could not be disturbed.

"Mr. Dennison will see me, Andrew," answered a voice, cheerfully, a voice that Robert Dennison, even through the closed doors, had heard and recognised in a moment. Immediately afterwards a well-known step—with triumph, hope, light-heartedness, Dennison felt bitterly, in its tread—came along the passage and Gerald Durant, unannounced, walked into his room, and up to his side.

"Congratulate me, Robert!" he said, taking hold of his cousin's hand, and grasping it heartily, whether Dennison willed it or not. "Things have gone better than could have been hoped for with every one, after all."

"Well, that depends upon whom you mean by 'every one,'" said Dennison, in his coldest voice, and freeing his hand abruptly from Gerald's warm grasp. "Does 'every one' mean you, or the little girl who came forward to save you? Scarcely her, I suppose?"

"I did not mean her, certainly, Robert, but even with Miss Lovell things have, in one sense, gone well. To a noble nature like hers the exposure of to-day is, I verily believe, better than living through a life of hypocrisy, as the poor little thing must have done if she hadn't had the courage to come forward, and speak the truth."

Robert Dennison laughed: the old cynical laugh with which he was accustomed to receive any of what he called Gerald's heroics. "Noble nature, hypocrisy, courage! What fine words you always have at command, Gerald! How charmingly clear it always is to you that every woman must be right in sacrificing herself for the *beaux yeux* of Mr. Gerald Durant! I need scarcely ask," he added, "how Miss Lovell's heroism, nobility, and courage, will be rewarded? With her name compromised as it is, I need scarcely ask if you mean to give up Lucia—fifty thousand pounds and all—and make Miss Lovell your wife?"

At the tone of Robert Dennison's voice, at the cold reception that it was evident he intentionally gave him, Gerald moved a step or two away from his side; and leaning his arm up against the wall beside the window, turned his face slightly from his cousin. As he stood thus, the graceful profile of his head and face showed, in clear silhouette, against the pure grey of the evening sky; and Dennison felt how he hated, how he abhorred, its beauty! He had never loved Gerald from the moment of his birth. As a child, a boy, a man, he had been jealous of every good thing which had been accorded to this easy, careless, unambitious nature, and denied to himself; but he had never positively loathed him until this moment. For now Gerald had committed the one offence which, to a heart like Dennison's, is beyond forgiveness: had treated him with generosity!

"You don't answer, Gerald. I suppose my question about Miss Lovell was an indiscreet one for me to ask, eh?"

"It certainly is not the subject which I came here

to speak about," answered Gerald; "but if you really care to have an answer, I'll give it you in two words. Miss Lovell"—with a sort of effort he brought this out—"will never be my wife!"

"Ah, so I thought. The honour of having saved you must be her reward! We will speak no more of her. And what is the subject then, as love matters are too sacred for us to handle, to which I am indebted for the pleasure of seeing you?"

Dennison's tone and manner were unmistakably those of a man determined to quarrel; but Gerald kept his temper admirably. Incapable though he was of thoroughly fathoming the depths of that sombre nature, he knew enough of it to sympathise with the miserable position of humiliated pride in which Dennison at this hour must feel himself to stand; and pitied him from his heart.

"There is much to be said between us, Robert, and—and I thought it might be as well got over to-night. If you don't care to be disturbed, though, I can go away, and come another time."

"No, no," interrupted Dennison, brusquely. "No other time for me, thank you. I know pretty well what you've come here about, and I'd rather have it out at once. 'After the late painful circumstances, the honour of the Durants, of Mr. Gerald Durant especially, requires a more complete vindication. Sooner than sully the honour of his family, and the sacredness of his own word, he did not betray the secret of a certain ill-born cousin of his, when by betraying it he could have insured his own safety. What he now demands is that this plebeian connection shall betray himself, and, having named his price for doing so, engage

to go quietly out of the country, and disturb the peace and honour of his family no more.' Curse it—speak out, can't you!" he exclaimed, with sullen passion, as Gerald continued silent. "You know your lesson, and I'm sure I've made it easy enough for you to say."

Then Gerald turned round, and faced Dennison full. "I don't think that I deserve this tone from you, Robert; upon my soul, I don't! I've kept pretty staunch to you throughout, as you know, and what I want now is, that everything that *must* be said between us should be said in a friendly spirit: said as it ought to be," he added, kindly, "between two men brought up, as we were, to look upon each other as brothers."

"Afterwards! You can suppose all this sort of preamble said, please. Afterwards! What is it that you want from me? What has brought you here now?"

And thus forced to use plain language; seeing, too, the temper of the man he had to deal with—but still with hesitation, still in the softest, most generous, words that he could choose—Gerald spoke. Up to this moment he had not mentioned to any living man one word of his cousin's marriage; but the time had come when, for other interests as well as his own, it was simply just that the truth should be made known: not publicly, of necessity, but among themselves—to Sir John and Lady Durant, and to Lucia. He thought he had a right to demand this; and in return undertook to promise that no estrangement between Dennison and any member of the family should be the result. "You've suffered bitterly enough already, Robert," he finished, his voice trembling with earnestness; "and among all

of us who care for you, the past shall be as much dead as though it had never been. The only brains we have among us are in your head, and if you want anything that Sir John's interest could do, I know right well——"

"If anything that Sir John's interest could do," interrupted Dennison, slowly and distinctly; "if—if anything that the interest of every Durant who ever lived could do, was put before me at this instant, I should refuse it. Family interest, family name, honour, money, are for you. I wish you joy of them. Do you think I can't foresee all your delightful future life?" he added, with cutting irony. "Married to Lucia, and bored to death by her; taking a row of Lucia's children to church, so set a good example in your parish; cringing to constituents; yawning through debates in the House, about which you know nothing, and for which you care less; increasing domination of your wife, port wine, gout, and a place in the family vault! This, my poor Gerald, will be your life, and it will suit you. Only don't think I wish to encroach upon any of the prerogatives that are yours by birth-right."

But still no sarcasm rose to Gerald's lips; no taunt as to how Robert Dennison *had* once desired these things, and had failed in the attainment of them. Men speak strongly about the things for which they care in earnest. Money, respectability, a seat in Parliament, would (could he have possessed them) have been Dennison's gods; and their forfeiture fired him into passion. The prospect of inheriting them all touched Gerald Durant with no thrill of pleasure whatsoever. A dinner in good company at the *Maison Dorée*; a hard run, well

mounted; a voice like Patti's; a pair of blue eyes like Archie Lovell's: these were the only things in life that his pleasure-loving nature ever coveted, and in his heart there was not one feeling of exultation over his approaching good fortune or of anger against Robert for his depreciation of it. Nay, in his heart, were the very truth told, he half envied his roturier cousin at this moment—for he was free, still!

"And what are your prospects then, Robert? After the delightful sketch you have given of my life—for which I am so well suited—it is fair, I think, that you should give me a fellow-picture of your own. You are not going to marry your first cousin, certainly, but in what other respects will your life be so very much freer from the common bore and weariness of living that mine?"

"Simply in this—and to you, perhaps, the words contain less meaning than they do to me: I shall be my own master! The bread that my own right hand earns for me I shall eat, unembittered by the thought that I have sold my life and manhood to buy it. You understand?"

"I hear you."

"As to my prospects, they can be told in a few words—joyful words for you to bear to Durant's Court to-morrow, or whenever you go there next! In a fortnight I shall have left England, and all of you, for ever."

"Left England? Robert, this is madness—the mere over-wrought feeling of the moment."

"It is nothing of the kind," interrupted Dennison, curtly. "Months ago I knew that there was an opening for me in Melbourne, and it suits my convenience

now to accept it. 'Tis no place of honour, Gerald," he added, with a bitterness of tone impossible to dissemble. "No post that any of the family will care to boast a relation, unhappily near to them in blood, fills! One of the contributors to the principal Melbourne paper was killed in a street-quarrel a few months ago, and the editor sent an offer to the writer of certain articles in one of the London reviews to replace him. That writer was myself. Now you know my prospects, and also how very unprofitable even the highest county interest would be to me for the future! No, thank you," for Gerald was about, eagerly, to speak; "I don't even want money. A couple of flannel shirts, a coat, revolver, and bowie-knife, are about as much as a Melbourne penny-a-liner need possess! If I'm not stabbed, like my predecessor, I haven't much doubt about earning money enough to live upon, and if I am—at least I shan't lie under the weight of family marble, and have the charity children hired to walk, two and two, and whine over me at my funeral! But that difference is one of degree rather than of kind, and it will be but a matter of a few years whether you, in the tomb of all the Durants, or I in a nameless grave, in a Melbourne burial-ground, are fertilising the ground again! Now, have you anything more to say? I ought, I dare say, to make speeches about the occurrences of the last few days, but really I see no object to be fulfilled by doing so. You have acted—like a Durant, let us say, and I like a Dennison! No words to you can be stronger. But, gentleman or blackguard, our paths for the future at all events lie apart." And he rose, and with cold and not undignified stateliness moved a step or two in the direction of the door.

Faithful, generous, true as he had been throughout, Gerald Durant did yet at this moment feel wonderfully small in his own estimation. When you have come to befriend, to forgive a man who has wronged you, under his own roof, and he tells you boldly that he is a black-guard—if you like to think him so—but desires nothing either from your forgiveness or your friendship, it is not an easy thing to retreat from the scene with a very thorough sense of your own dignity!

“I shall remember you always as the nearest relation I have, Robert. All our present feelings will soften some day, and then——”

“Then, perhaps, Robert Dennison will come to his senses and be glad, at whatever price is bid, to offer the reparation he owes to the wounded family honour. Robert Dennison will do nothing of the sort. He gives you freely, now, the information you have come here to seek. On the tenth of January last, Robert Dennison was married to Margaret Hall at the church of St. Ethelburga, in the city, and you—are freed from your promise! You may get a certificate of the marriage—it is my wish that you should do so—and take it with you to Durant’s Court to-morrow. Has more to be said?” for Gerald lingered uneasily yet. “You have got Lucia, and I—have lost——”

His voice died: he turned, walked across to the window, and there, through blinding mists, stood looking out at the river, black and desolate to him now as it had been to Maggie on that night when she fled from the girl’s song, and from her own last hopes of love and of life down the narrow city street!

And so—alone in the dark hour of retribution—Gerald left him.

CHAPTER XX.

"Advienne que pourra!"

THAT evening, close to suffocation in the hot heart of London, was fresh, as early autumn evenings are after rain, in the green stillness of the far-away Staffordshire fields.

When Archie Lovell had bade good-bye to her companion at the Hatton Station, and was walking slowly homeward through the sinking light, it seemed to her that trees had never looked so green, nor meadows smelt so sweet, as on this evening; and greenness and freshness both smote upon her heart with an unutterable sense of pain! What, the world had not changed a bit, then, only her life? The trees were ready with their friendly shelter, the fields with their thousand odours for all the lives that could enjoy them still! for young girls with their companions; for lovers whispering in the twilight; for all bright and joyous lives—lives undarkened by shame, loveless and alone as hers would be!

As she walked along she pictured drearily to herself how the remainder of this dreary week would pass. To-day was Wednesday; three days to drag through before she must put on her new bonnet, and best dress, and go to the village church for all the people to gaze at her! To look forward to the end of life itself could scarcely have seemed longer than to look forward these three days. After Sunday she thought it would be

different. When all the parish people, when the Durants and Major Seton had seen her, and said and thought their worst, she might brave her altered condition better. The newness of the shame would wear even from her father's heart in time; and people after nine days would tire of talking of her—this consolation Mrs. Sherborne had offered during the journey—and she would set herself regular tasks of work; and so get through the hours, perhaps.

After Sunday. But how bear the intolerable weight of the three intervening days? how bear the silent misery of her father's face? how endure Bettina's loud reproaches, and the silent wonder of the servants? Next week, it seemed to her, she would be old in suffering—callous, hardened. If she could but shirk the present—crouch down her head in some dark corner where no eye should see her, and wake and find the thing told—half of the nine days' wonder over! and then, with a blank dead sensation, almost like a physical pain, the knowledge fell full upon her of how she had no choice whatever in the matter, but must bear *all*—the first hot shame, the fevered excitement of notoriety, the dull passing away into oblivion and contempt: all. The whole harvest which her folly had sown: her self-sacrifice and her generosity garnered in for her. Was truth such a much finer and nobler thing than falsehood? she asked herself. And the only answer her heart gave was, that while she was telling falsehood she had been tolerably happy; and now that she had told the truth she was intolerably miserable. In her heroic moments, as she was travelling up to London this morning, she had thought, "I shall be Archie Wilson, the Bohemian, again, after to-day. When everything is known, my

conscience will have got back its freedom, whatever else I lose." And everything was known, and she was not Archie Wilson, the Bohemian, at all. She was a Philistine, heart and soul: a Philistine yearning bitterly after the good, solid things of life—the peace, the honour, the repute, which her own rash generosity had robbed her of.

All was peaceful and at rest when she reached home: the purple twilight closing round the little parsonage, the birds twittering to each other yet among the garden-trees, the rain-washed china-roses smelling sweet around the porch: all peaceful and at rest in the quiet country home upon which the knowledge of her story was about to bring shame and desolation. With a beating heart she walked to the parlour-door, opened it, and found Bettina seated alone there at her tea, her bonnet still on—the strings turned back over her shoulders—her face heated, and with one candle, as if in ostentatious economy, to light her at her repast.

"Where's papa?" said Archie, bluntly; and walking up to the table, she looked steadily into her step-mother's face.

Mrs. Lovell turned down the corners of her mouth, and pushed a couple of plates from her with a gesture of repugnance. They contained the remains of an excellent high tea; cold chicken bones, a look as of salad upon one; a large piece of home-baked cake, butter, and a suspicion of marmalade on the other. But nothing exasperated Bettina so much as the imputation of being able to swallow food when she was alone or in adversity.

"Don't ask me where your father is, Archie! At Major Seton's, no doubt, talking of his bronzes, and

his clocks, and his Madame Pompadours—a very nice subject for a minister of the gospel!—and leaving me to work the precious cure of souls...beard that vile woman, and then be insulted by my own turn-coat party in a public vestry, and when they tantamount to promised me sixteen votes last night! But I've done my best," added Bettina, with rising choler. "I've tried to start things as they should be started in the parish, and now your father may do the rest. Only don't ask me where he is. I wash my hands of everything to do with the parish....and when he ought to have been at my side, supporting me. Nine hours with only a cracknel, and now the sight of food makes me sick!" And she pushed the plates, virtuously, a couple of inches further on the table.

Parochial victory had, after all, not fallen into the hands Mrs. Lovell intended. Mrs. Brown, the surgeon's wife, had certainly been ousted, mainly through Bettina's exertions, from the place of power; but at the eleventh hour a base coalition had arisen, by which old Miss Smith, the miller's sister, had been put into her place. On that memorable thirteenth of June, when Pitt declared to the thunderstruck House that he should vote in favour of Mr. Fox, a greater blank could scarcely have overcome the hearts of Warren Hastings' followers than had overcome Mrs. Lovell when before eighteen ladies in the vestry the leader of her own party had announced her intention of supporting the miller's sister, *vice* Mrs. Brown deposed. The barrenness of human ambitions—the frailty of human alliances—was laid bare before her heart in that hour; and the continued absence of her husband and stepdaughter, on her return home, had worked her wounded spirit up to the last

point of irritation. Archie saw that it was so with relief. Kind words, gentleness, were, she knew, what would be too much for her bursting heart now; and, seating herself at the table, she cut off a slice of bread, and asked Bettina, in a voice that she tried to make like her usual one, for tea. "You—you don't ask after my news," she stammered, after some moments had passed in silence. "Have you heard——"

"I have heard nothing," interrupted Mrs. Lovell, hotly, "and I don't wish to hear. No news is ever of any good to us."

"Mr. Durant is free, Bettina, that is all. I thought perhaps you might be glad to know it."

"I am not glad. I want to hear nothing about the Durants;" and Bettina, burning in her very soul with curiosity, got up with dignity from the table. "I have no further interest in anything connected with this parish. As Mr. Durant is in possession of the clue to our dishonour you need scarcely tell me that he will return to the neighbourhood! To-day I should say would be about the last time you will ever be invited to the Court—for, although you have not the civility to tell me, I conclude that is where you have spent the day. Nothing but this scrape of his own has, I am convinced, kept the young man silent so long. Good-night to you, Archie, and when your father *does* return let him know that, worn out with fatigue and trouble, I have retired to my rest."

"But, Bettina, I want to tell you——"

"I will hear nothing to-night, Archie. Peace and quiet, not frivolous worldly talk, are what I stand in need of now!"

And blind to the white wan face, the hollow eyes that were pleading to her to stay, Mrs. Lovell went off

at once to her room, shutting the door immediately afterwards with the peculiar sharp energy which always warned the other members of the household when any lengthened course of meditation was in prospect.

So to her father alone the first hard confession would have to be made! if indeed some blackened, distorted version of the story Mrs. Sherborne had brought down from London had not already reached his ears. She lingered over the tea-table; absently, and without hunger, eating a mouthful or two of bread until the servant came in to clear the things; then, nervously dreading lest the girl should watch her too closely, went out of doors and with heavy limbs dragged herself to the same spot at the boundary of the orchard where she had parted from Ralph last night.

She would rest herself here, she thought, till she heard her father's step at the garden-gate; then go boldly to him, and while he kissed her, while he held her in his arms, sob out to him the story of her shame! It would be easier so perhaps, after all! easier with no one to come between her prayers and his forgiveness! easier with the darkness screening away the horrible suffering that she shrank from having to look at on his face!

It was nearly ten o'clock before Mr. Lovell returned home. Archie started up eagerly at the sound of his well-known step upon the gravel; then sank back, with sickening terror, into her seat. Her father was not alone; and the voice that was talking to him in those low but earnest tones was Major Seton's. Then all was told and over! How the time that followed passed she never knew; or whether minutes or hours went by in the kind of deathly swoon into which her heart fell. What she distinctly knew, what she distinctly remembers

next, was Major Seton being at her side, speaking very gently to her, and with tender care wrapping something warm around her chilled frame.

"Margaret told us you were out here still, and your father made me bring this—his own thick plaid—and faithfully promise to wrap you in it. I have not suffocated you quite, have I, Archie?"

"Does—does papa know?" was all she could falter: and her head sank forward on her breast.

"Yes, Archie, he knows everything," said Major Seton. "You must not be angry with me for telling him first, but I met him returning from the village, as I walked up from the station, and the temptation to be the bearer of the good news was too strong for me. Why did you run away from us all?" he added, taking her cold, pulseless hand into his. "We all wanted to be your escort from the police-court, old Sir John, Gerald, and I—and found you flown. If you had waited to come by the express, as I did, you see you would have got home very nearly as soon, and have had me as your companion on your journey."

"I—I never thought that you would remember me! I thought every one would be thinking of Mr. Durant alone! Major Seton," raising her face—deathly pale, even in that dim light, he saw it was; and in its pallor loved it more than he had ever loved it in its bloom—"are you sure that you have told him all?"

"I have told him *all*, Archie. Your father knows every word of the story now; knows how true to herself his daughter has been at last—how brave, how faithful——"

"Oh," she cried, starting up passionately, "let me go to him! I, brave—I, faithful—and papa knows everything, and can think me so still!"

But Major Seton kept her hand fast in his. "You shall go to your father in a few minutes, but I am going to talk to you a little first. He wishes it to be so."

She seated herself obediently; and Ralph, instead of speaking, busied himself again in drawing the plaid around her shoulders. As he did this, Archie was conscious that his hand trembled strangely; and the blood began to flow with life again in her veins. Was it dimly possible, not only that her father forgave her, but that Ralph would take her back to the old place—no, not to that; to a place higher and dearer far in his heart?

She stammered out something about his great goodness, and the trouble he took for her, and how unworthy she was of it all; and then Ralph flung his arm around the little shrinking figure, plaid and all, and drew her to his side.

"Archie, can you ever care for me?" he whispered. "I'm too old and too rough and too plain for you, I know, but I love you from my heart! Will you have me?"

"I—I? ah, Major Seton, you are saying this now out of kindness!"

"Am I? Kindness to myself, then. Why, Archie," his voice sinking into a tone of wonderful tenderness, "what hope but you have I had in my life? What have I ever wanted to possess but you? Don't pretend to think it a new thing. You know that as a child I loved you, as a girl——"

"As a girl found me changed and false and worthless!" she interrupted, with something of her old impetuosity. "The first day in Morteville, don't you remember how I looked in your face—oh, Major

Seton, you won't hate me when you think of it?—and told you I had never been in London in my life! I was afraid at first you had recognised me, and were going to tell papa, and then, when you didn't speak, I thought perhaps if I told one great story it might set everything right—and I told it!"

"You did," said Major Seton; "and considering that I had looked deliberately in your face in London, and then helped you into the train at Ashford, you would have acted less like a child perhaps by speaking the truth."

"And you knew everything from the first then?" she cried. "You have known all along that I was acting a false part to you?"

Major Seton did not answer; only held her closer to his side, and looked down fondly into the face upheld so close to his.

"You have known all along that I was deceiving you?" she persisted; "and yet you tell me that you care for me still? It's pity, pity that makes you say this, Major Seton! You are so sorry for what I suffered to-day, and for papa, and the shame I have brought upon him and——"

"And I ask you to be my wife, Archie? Do you refuse me?"

"If I thought it wasn't from pity that you ask me!" she stammered, trying in vain to turn away from him.

And then Major Seton held her close against his heart: the heart from which he had never—no, not for one instant—succeeded in putting her away, and their compact was made. . . .

. . . "I shall never be quite sure you did not ask me out of pity!" said Archie, after a long silence.

"And I shall never be quite sure that you did not

once like Gerald Durant better than you will ever like me!" said Major Seton, quickly. "So we shall each have some kind of misgiving to disturb our peace. Which has the most probability, do you think, for its basis? Look in your glass any morning, Miss Lovell, and say if it's likely that I, Ralph Seton, asked you to be my wife out of pity? Look at me and Gerald, any time when we are together, and say which would be the likeliest man to win a young girl's fancy?"

"I didn't know we were talking of fancies now, Major Seton; I thought we were talking of——"

"Of what, Archie?"

"Of love, then! as you make me say it; and Gerald did take my fancy once; he takes it still: and you—oh, how badly I express everything!"

But Ralph Seton did not seem to think so.

They lingered on and on, forgetting, with the sublime selfishness of lovers, that poor Mr. Lovell, all this time, was patiently waiting for them at the hall-door; and were only recalled at last to a consciousness of the external world by the distant village clock striking eleven. As they rose to go, Archie stood for a minute or two, silent and thoughtful; then suddenly she turned, threw up her arms around Major Seton's neck, and, drawing down his head to her level, pressed his brown scarred cheek with her lips: the lips whose bloom was still intact as when she had kissed and clung to him last, a little child in Genoa.

"You forgive me utterly, Ralph? I'm not noble, or heroic, or any of the fine things you have called me. It was accident, I think, that made me tell the truth at all, and up to the last I would have got out of telling it if I could; but *you* forgive me freely, as you forgave my falsehood about Tino long ago? You know

that you have not one scruple in asking me to be your wife?"

And I find, after several unsuccessful attempts, that I must give up trying to describe what Ralph Seton felt and answered. Can one language ever adequately reproduce another? Can dull ink and paper transcribe what a girl's fresh voice, what the touch of a girl's lips say, to the world-wearied heart of a man like Seton, in such a moment as this?

"Forgive you, my dearest!" he cried at last, bending over her with a great reverence in his tenderness. "No, Archie. When it is a question of forgiveness, of unworthiness, between us two, I feel that it is my place to be silent. Kiss me once more; put your hands in mine—so. Now, child, you and I will keep perfect faith, whatever comes, for the future. '*Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra*,' you remember?"

"I remember," she answered, between her tears. "'*Advienne que pourra*'—oh, Ralph! can anything ever happen to part us two again?"

CHAPTER XXI.

A Glimpse of the Blue.

WHEN Sunday came, the country people, from miles around, flocked in to Hatton church, as Archie had expected, to look at her; only, instead of being an object of contempt, she found herself a heroine! instead of humiliation, she had her triumph at last! On the preceding Friday, Lady Durant and Lucia (acting, no doubt, from the generous dictates of their own hearts, but a little, too, under male domination) had not only made a stately call at the Rectory, but had ostenta-

tiously taken Archie for a drive through the village in their carriage, thus showing, publicly, to the country world what view was held by these high in authority of her conduct. The example was as contagious as royal favour shown unexpectedly to a half-suspected favourite. The parson's daughter was one of the right sort—had come forward and helped Mr. Gerald through thick and thin; the parson's daughter was riding all the afternoon with the ladies of the Court. The leading parishioners came up, forthwith, with their wives and daughters, to call at the Rectory. Not only Archie herself, but Mr. Lovell and Bettina, clothing-club feuds forgotten, were vested with the interest of public characters; and on Sunday, as I have said, crowds of country people flocked in to Hatton church, eager to have a look at the downcast girlish face in the parson's pew—the heroine, Archie Lovell.

Her triumph made the girl infinitely sad, infinitely humble. There was so wide a difference between the Archie Lovell whom the world called noble, and the weak, wavering, passion-tossed Archie Lovell whom she knew. If things had shaped themselves differently at this sharp turning-point of her life—if Ralph had forsaken her; if the people she lived amongst, instead of crowning her with laurel, had happened to consider her as lost—ten chances to one she would have hardened and deteriorated down to the level assigned her. But success is the real touchstone of character, and Archie's stood the test beautifully. Four weeks ago she was a self-willed child, smoking her cigarettes, and defying Mrs. Maloney and the proprieties as she ran wild about the Morteville streets: a child suspecting no evil, and careless how she incurred its imputation. As she walked home on her father's arm from

Hatton church to-day, she was a woman—softened by a sense of her own weakness, brought low and meek by the love which in her innocent heart she seemed so little to have deserved. In her hour of success every baser element was cast out from that fine nature, and all that remained, henceforth and for ever, was pure gold.

I don't think I need describe a double wedding that took place one soft October morning in Hatton church. How opinions varied as to whether the pensive fair face or the mignonne dark one looked best beneath its orange blossoms; how Bettina, afraid really to cry because of her lovely dress and bonnet-strings, held her handkerchief to her eyes in delightful proximity to Lady Durant of Durant's Court; how Mr. Lovell, in his agitation, very nearly married the wrong people to each other; how Sholto M'Ivor, in returning thanks, as best man, for the bridesmaids, contrived in twenty incoherent words to condense together every embarrassing remark that could possibly be made on the subject of old loves and transferred affections. It is all a thing of the past now. The wedding took place more than a year ago, and the four people most interested know pretty well whether the adventure they made then in the great lottery is likely to turn out a prize or not.

Gerald Durant has left the army, and lives at Durant's Court with the old people. He is a good deal bored, but not more, he fondly tries to think, than he would be if he was going through his former mill-horse life of London and Paris dissipation. He keeps excellent hunters, has instituted a *chef* in the Court kitchen, already inclines ever so slightly to stoutness,

and is not very much worried, save by his wife's occasional fits of jealousy about Mrs. Seton and the persistency with which she sings long songs, always in the style of Mr. Bligh, of an evening. As years go by, he thinks, and as Lucia's baby-daughter grows old enough to require training, he will probably be less bored still; and in the meantime it is a great thing to have as pleasant a house to go to as Ludbrooke, a woman as charming as Mrs. Seton to leaven the whole dull mass of heavy county society.

Of the Setons, all I have to say is written in four words—four very rare words to be able to record of any two human beings—they suit each other! Half Mr. Lovell's time is spent at Ludbrooke. Troy hangs there—there was no good light for it in the parsonage, the poor fellow suddenly discovered, when Archie married—and of an evening he and his daughter stand before it still, talking in whispers, her hand within his arm, of the great poet and painter he may yet become, should fate prove a little kinder to his wishes.

I can fancy them talking just as foolishly when all the roses shall have died on Mrs. Seton's face, and when the blue eyes have grown dimmed, and other affections, other cares, surround her in the years to come.

Women of weaker calibre can forget after they are married that they were daughters once. In a heart as loving and as large as Archie's, there will be no dethronements.

THE END.







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Edwards, (Mrs.) Annie
Archie Lovell

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